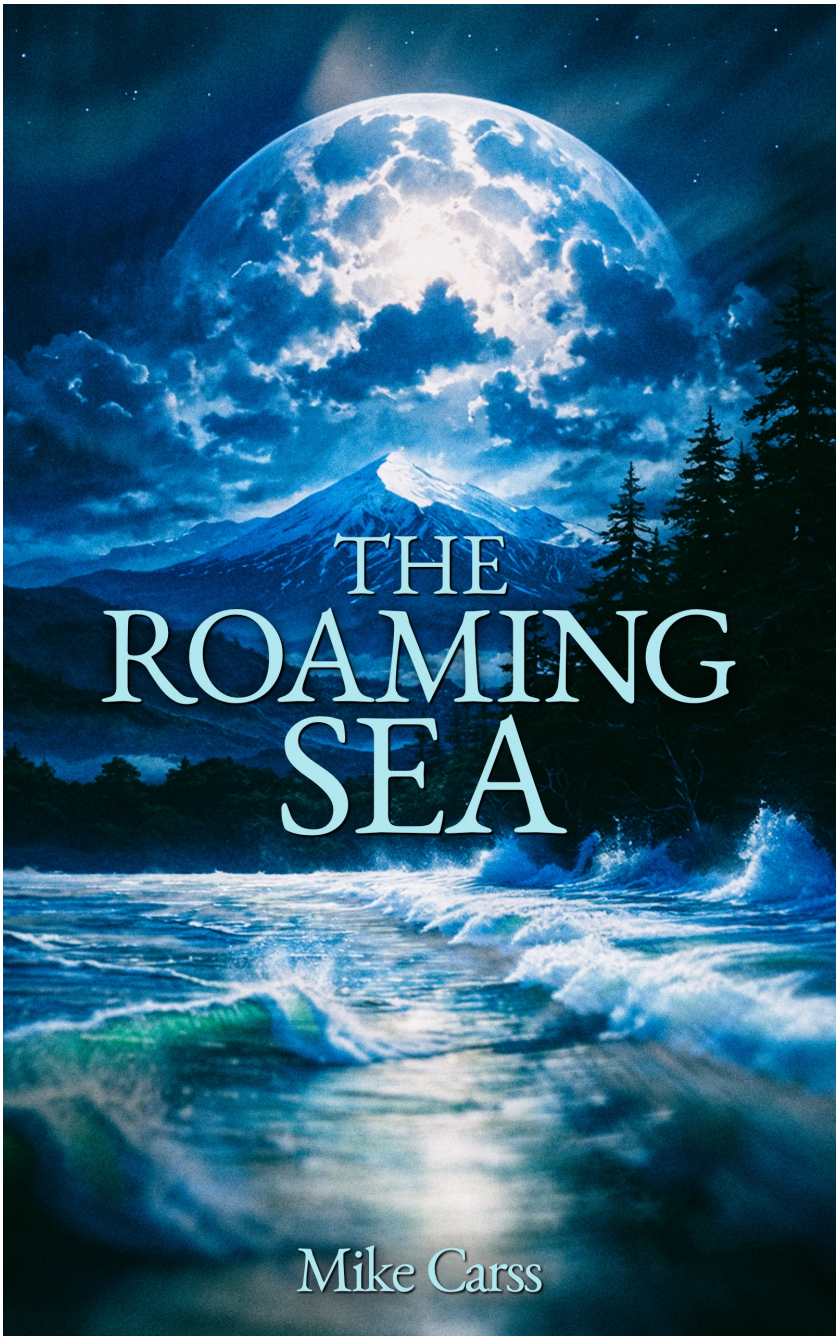
THE
ROAMING
SEA
Mike Carss

The Roaming Sea

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THE ROAMING SEA

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Written by Mike Carss.

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ONE

The Accident

Callum dipped his bloody hands into the washbasin's cool water. Small eddies drew the blood from his skin—delicate swirls disappearing into a pinkish hue. Sweat dripped from his brow. The stifling air within the canvas medical tent had grown unbearable. Lost in the moment, he pulled in a deep breath and gradually let it go, revisiting the day's events.

The pactrids had attacked mid-morning. How many, Callum wasn't sure, but their numbers had surprised even the officers in charge at the camp. Scouts never arrived with a warning of the impending assault, either. With still no sign of them this afternoon, they were assumed dead. Callum, along with nine other medics, had stabilised over one hundred troops. The number of slain men, however, far outweighed the capability the ten medics could manage. Triage was a necessary evil in Callum's line of work—an aspect he'd never been able to cope with. The men who survived, currently awaiting transport to a proper hospital, would hopefully live to see another day. But if they were lucky, they'd be wounded enough to be considered for honourable discharge. After their ordeal, those guys deserved no less.

Breaking free from his thoughts, Callum grabbed a bar of soap to scrub his hands clean. Someone pulled aside the canvas flap, causing late afternoon sunlight to spill into the tent.

"Hidaro," Sergeant Ghera called out.

Callum glanced at the man. "Yeah, Sarge?"

"Transport in fifteen. Be there."

What a way to end his tenday shift. When Callum woke this morning, he was eager to return home that evening for a decent meal at his favourite inn, a long soak at the baths, and his own bed. Now, he felt guilty he'd enjoy such simple pleasures while countless men lay dead in the fields.

"You okay?" his sergeant asked, approaching him. He was career military—one of those guys hardened enough to remain in the service after his seven years of conscription, yet still managed to show empathy toward his men. A rare breed.

Callum blinked. His hands sat idly in the washbasin.

Am I okay?

"Sorry," he replied, grabbing a towel. "Just a little shook."

Ghera offered a grim smile. "Nothing to be sorry about, son. Everyone's a little shook today."

"How did you guys push back the pactrids?"

The sergeant shrugged. "We didn't. They retreated after butchering our men."

"How many were out there?"

"I'd say fifteen."

Callum's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Yeah, I know," Ghera said in response. "Now you understand why so many of ours were killed."

"Did we get any of them?"

Ghera nodded. "Two."

"Quite the feat," Callum mused.

"Not sure it was worth such a heavy loss."

Despite the heat, Callum's face flushed. "I didn't mean to sound callous, Sarge."

Ghera patted Callum's shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Hidaro. I know you didn't. Get your gear and get home. I don't want you here any longer than necessary."

"Thanks," Callum said while lifting the washbasin filled with pink water. He brought it outside and dumped the contents as Ghera followed behind.

“You and the other medics did good work today. If you’re still feeling shook, focus on who you saved.” The sergeant nodded his goodbye and headed toward the command tents.

Having remained in the medical tent all day, Callum surveyed the camp. Any other day, he would’ve appreciated the blue skies, but he wasn’t in any mood to be comforted by the pleasant weather. Troops bearing long faces passed by, along with a few runners with documents to deliver. He glanced down at the forgotten washbasin in his hand. Scoffing at his distracted mind, he returned it to the tent, then headed to the barracks.

Reaching his bunk, he kicked open the footlocker to gather his few belongings and spare uniforms, then stuffed everything into a tall rucksack. He unfastened his canteen from his belt and sat it atop the bundle, then closed the sack. While shouldering the load, he spotted a fellow medic and friend entering the barracks. He must have just arrived.

Callum waved to catch his attention. “Hey, Oren!”

The man was taller than Callum, and he found it easy to pack on muscle without trying. He was handsome in his own rough way, and Callum had fallen hard for him when they met at the training academy. After swallowing his nerve, he’d shared his feelings with Oren, only to discover his friend wasn’t interested in such a relationship. But to Callum’s relief, that didn't affect their friendship, which mattered most to him anyway. Although they had little in common, Oren was the only person he considered a friend.

Upon catching sight of Callum, Oren rushed over and hugged him. “I heard the news. I’m glad you’re okay.”

Callum sighed and shook his head. “It was brutal. I don’t envy the guys who gotta pull the bodies from the field.”

Oren grimaced at the prospect. “Hopefully I don’t pull the short stick. Listen, Greta’s been hounding me to get you to come over for supper. It’s been too long since we spent some time together, away from all this,” he said, sweeping a hand at the doleful atmosphere.

“I’d really like that, but our leave time never seems to line up.”

“I know. We’ll figure something out.” Then Oren’s face lit up. “Some good news. We’ve got another kid on the way.”

Callum painted a smile on his face. “No kidding? Your first is barely two. Are you and Greta just going to keep making babies?”

“Why not? The government keeps paying us a stipend for each

kid to raise them. Here's hoping it'll be another boy. Gotta do our part to keep the army flush with fresh troops, right?"

Callum grimaced inwardly at the statement, especially after the loss they'd suffered. *Do you really want to bring new life into this slaughter?*

"But as a parent, isn't seven years a long time?" Callum asked. "Seven years of service. Seven years of worry."

Oren's grin straightened somewhat, then offered Callum a shrug. "Sure, but there's nothing we can do about that. It is what it is."

A pang of guilt hit Callum for saying the obvious out loud to his friend. He couldn't fathom the worry Oren and Greta would experience, but they were proud parents and enjoyed all that came with raising a child.

"I guess congratulations are in order," he said, giving Oren a friendly slap on the arm. "All the more reason to get together soon. But I gotta get to transport. Give my love to Greta. Be safe."

"I will," he replied with a smile.

Callum shifted the rucksack on his back and made his way to the transport tents, easily distinguishable by their taller design. The extra headroom was needed to accommodate the transport bubble's size, otherwise holes in the roof would result. He pulled back the flap to find a surly corporal holding a clipboard.

"Damn it, Hidaro. It's about time. You're holding everyone up," he said, gesturing at the transport circle already filled with men.

"Sorry, sir," Callum replied while hustling toward the circle, imparting silent nods of apology to the guys waiting on him.

The transporter on duty was only a kid, maybe fifteen. Callum groaned inwardly. Kids always took forever to complete transport. He couldn't blame them, though. They were still honing their skill and needed to concentrate hard to accomplish the task. Seasoned transporters could complete in ten seconds, but the young ones could take two minutes or more.

"Whenever you're ready, son," the corporal said to the kid, then took a guarding position outside the tent flap to stop anyone from interrupting the procedure.

Accidents were exceedingly rare, but Callum assuredly knew a seed of worry sat in the mind of every man around him. Surely the poor kid, who closed his eyes to begin the process, felt the pressure

of all those eyes upon him. A glowing yellow barrier rose from the transport circle, and everyone knew well enough to give it ample space. Breaking it meant losing whatever went through.

Callum spent the quiet moment to close his own eyes and take another breath, pushing the memory of the day from his mind. He'd be home soon enough. Though it was at times like this, loneliness came knocking. Twice, he allowed himself to partner with someone—to risk loving someone—and both times, that love was stolen from him by this damn war. *Forget about it. These memories don't do me any good.*

A distant shout caught his attention. He couldn't distinguish the words, but the inflexion of the voice told him something was wrong. They were words of warning. A chorus of yells swiftly accompanied the first, multiplying with each passing moment. Then he heard that dreaded sound. The terrible trumpeting call of the pactrids. Everyone in the circle grew nervous, watching the transporter anxiously.

"C'mon, kid," one man whispered. "Get us outta here."

The boy didn't respond, but judging by his eyes squeezed shut, there was no doubt he was trying his best.

The ring of clashing swords pierced through the growing pandemonium of screams. It sounded like the fight was heading straight for their tent. More likely, pactrids were levelling the entire area, trampling anyone and anything standing in their way. The corporal broke through the flap, horror written on his face.

"Sorry, men. You all know this kid's worth more than you lot. I need to get him out of here."

Everyone in the circle—excluding Callum, who simply stared in disbelief—cried out, pleading for time.

Is this how it ends? An unexpected wave of calm crashed over Callum while contemplating all the pain and misery in his world. *Maybe it's best to end it here.*

"I'm . . . almost there," the boy said through gritted teeth.

Taking into account the troopers' begging cries and weighing the risk, the corporal dashed outside to reassess the situation. Tension emanating from the men was palpable—nervous breaths, and eyes trying to peer through the thick canvas to better understand what was happening—but Callum remained at peace. The idea of being no more was somehow alluring, even if the journey there would be frightening, and likely painful.

It was taboo to speak of the outcome of failed transports because anyone involved died in terrible ways. Some were transported underground, instantly crushed. Accidental discoveries would reveal their bones years later. Others were discovered in a crumpled pile, having fallen from a great height. *The pain will be short and temporary. It's a small price to pay for freedom.*

Heavy pactrid footfalls shook the ground. Their trumpeting war calls and the peal of battling swords were overwhelmingly loud. The corporal reappeared, pulling the flap aside, allowing a glimpse of the madness just beyond the canvas walls. An untold number of pactrids towered over the troops brave enough to fight. Heavy scale armour protected every curve of their body, even their long trunks that issued those fearsome trumpeting calls.

"We're out of time," the corporal shouted over the roar of battle.

Having already accepted his fate, Callum gave a calm nod of understanding. The troops flanking him, however, weren't prepared for their grisly end. Some hollered, others pleaded, but their wails didn't move the corporal. While it was a hard thing to admit, the corporal was right. One transporter *was* worth more than all of them. The corporal scooped the kid protectively into his arms.

"No!" the transporter cried, but it was enough to break his concentration.

The bubble collapsed.

Callum's stomach lurched. He was falling—tumbling out of control. A spiralling view of blue sky and green foliage approached at an alarming rate. He reeled his arms, attempting to pivot himself upright, but before any correction could be made, he was smashing through the treetops. Limbs bent and splintered under his weight, throwing him askew. He tried reaching out to slow his descent, but branches tugged and scratched, forcing him to shield his face while they passed. A sudden impact against a thick limb knocked the wind from his lungs, followed by another hit on his side. Falling free again, he clawed frantically—hopelessly—at the air, before finally hitting solid ground on his back. The rucksack provided some cushioning, but it took multiple attempts before he could manage to suck in a lungful of air.

Dazed, he opened his eyes and stared skyward. His vision swam, finally focusing on the stout limbs. They divided again and again into intricate branches. A mesmerising display. Swaying

gently in the wind, the leaves brushed against each other—the sound akin to distant waves. After the clash of battle, the relative silence here was deafening. He took in a breath, noting the dominant foreign scents. Damp loam, fresh yet earthy, and a musky-sweet smell of decaying leaves—pungent, but not unpleasant. While he'd heard others describe a forest, he'd never been in the centre of one until now. It was beautiful.

How am I alive?

Without moving, he assessed his body. Undoubtedly, he'd expect bruises, but nothing felt broken. He gingerly prodded his chest for serious damage, then touched the side of his head. It stung from cuts and scratches. Pulling back his fingers revealed a trace amount of blood—nothing of great concern. With the rucksack under him, he already had a slight elevation, and he pulled himself to a sitting position without pain. A good sign. He checked his legs, testing their range of motion as best he could. There was no question he'd be sore, but he couldn't find any consequential injuries. These massive trees had saved his life.

He gazed up again and whispered, "Thank you."

Standing up proved to be a more arduous task. His vision swayed. Using the nearby tree for stability, he surveyed the surrounding area. It was possible someone else had fallen close by.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, he called out, "Hello?" then immediately regretted it. *You idiot. You're standing in the middle of a forest—you're in enemy territory.* That was one reason Anberans warred with the pactrids. The first was, of course, fighting to take their land back. The second was to regain access to the precious resource belonging to them: wood.

He crouched down amid the mossy undergrowth and listened for movement, or the possibility of someone responding to his call. Luckily, no one was around to hear him. Only the wind between the leaves replied. He silently chastised himself again for his poor lapse of judgement.

The inability to see the sun through the green canopy above made it difficult to orient himself. It was afternoon, and he wanted to aim himself north. North would always lead him home.

• • •

“Dad, has anyone ever crossed the sea?”

Callum sat next to his father on the grassy promontory overlooking the dry seabed, enjoying the setting sun warming his skin. Sea birds whirled overhead in wide, lazy arcs—their distinctive calls drifting in the air, mixed with the distant hubbub of the city, Anbera.

Other onlookers sat nearby, taking in the scenery. It was a popular time to be here. The moon—a monumental icon sitting upon the northern skyline—had begun its ponderous tenday trek across the sky, and with it, the impending arrival of the sea. With each passing minute, water flowed in to cover the seabed. Soon, the violent crash and roar of the water would smash against the stone cliffs below.

His father shook his head in reply. “When the Roaming Sea arrives in force, its current is too strong to sail upon. Not to mention the difficulty of building some kind of rig to lower a ship down that cliff. It’s nearly five hundred metres down to the water.”

Callum uttered a disappointed grunt.

“Why do you want to cross the sea?” his father asked.

“If we found another home, we wouldn’t have to fight the pactrids.”

“But son, Anbera is our home. They’re the ones trying to steal it from us. Running away is cowardly. You should be proud you’ll be fighting against the ’trids.”

Callum knew this day would come—his entire life, he knew it—but that didn’t make it any easier to accept. He was thirteen. His schooling was done. Tomorrow, he’d begin training at the academy. The first year would be learning everything about the military. Then, if he was lucky, the following four years would be spent specialising in a particular skill. If not, he’d be thrown into foot soldier training and sent to war at fifteen. The idea of fighting never felt right to him, but he’d never dare speak that aloud. Soldiers who did were marked as traitors and gaoled indefinitely. Sometimes they were hanged in public squares.

“I’m not a coward,” Callum stated defiantly. He knew that’s what his father wanted to hear, but deep down, a pit of doubt grew in his gut.

His father pulled him close and ruffled his hair. “I know you’re no coward, son. You’re only nervous about tomorrow. That’s

normal." He dug into his breast pocket and pulled out a compact leather pouch. "I have something for you. Open your hand."

Callum obeyed, and his father slipped a small metal object into his hand—a compass attached to a delicate chain. He held it gently, inspecting its fine features. Engraved on the backside were the words *To find your way home*.

"If you're ever lost or separated from your troop and don't know which way to go, you can use this," his father said. "Do you know how to use a compass?"

Callum shook his head.

"It has many features, but I'll explain the easiest way to find north. Here, stand up. Hold it in your open palm, and align the compass so that north points at your fingers."

Callum did so, then looked back to his father for more guidance.

"Now turn yourself until the needle points southwest."

Callum frowned in confusion at this next step, watching the needle sway and pull itself until it pointed in that direction. But upon looking toward the horizon, he found himself standing north. The moon on the horizon confirmed it.

"Why does the needle point that way? Why not north at the moon?"

His father let out a chuckle. "If it pointed at the moon—moving across the sky—that wouldn't do you much good, would it?"

"I guess not," Callum replied.

"Nobody knows why the needle always points southwest, but that doesn't matter. Just remember, home will always be north."

Callum untangled the chain and hung it around his neck.

"Keep it tucked for safekeeping," his father said, slipping the compass inside Callum's shirt. It was momentarily cold against Callum's skin, causing him to laugh.

"Make me proud, son."

• • •

"I hope I made you proud, dad."

Callum blinked away tears at the memory. Returning to the

present, he pulled the compass from under his shirt and held it flat in his hand, aligned so that north pointed at his outstretched fingers. He turned his body until the needle pointed southwest, then looked forward at his destination. Trees obstructed his view in all directions. There was no way to be sure of anything except for the tool in hand. With a shrug, he pocketed the compass and began his journey north.

He was still contending with the unfamiliar landscape. Of course he'd seen trees before, but only as single objects in the city, cordoned off to keep people at bay. Even then, they were unusual sights. He'd seen the edges of a forest while on duty as a medic, pulling hurt troops to safety, but it was so far in the distance, he couldn't appreciate the grandeur of the trees.

Reaching forest borders was always a difficult goal. Whenever they managed to press the front lines closer to the trees, the pactrids would redouble their efforts to push back. Scouts recounted times they snuck beyond the treeline, expecting to find hidden pactrid camps or patrols, but they never found anything. A few times, Callum heard them talk about the grandiosity of the towering trees, but admitted difficulty to accurately convey how it made them feel.

Now, Callum understood. As he passed a wide tree trunk, he held out a hand to touch the rough bark. He couldn't explain why, but it brought a smile to his face. That only lasted a moment—overtaken by a stroke of regret. When the troops managed to push ahead and hold the line, lumberjacks would fell these trees for their coveted resources. As ridiculous as it seemed, he felt sorrow for the trees.

Once a harvest was complete, the troops knew well enough to hold a defensive position after falling back. The pactrids always retaliated hard—akin to the attack he'd just witnessed. This time, however, their camp stood well over a kilometre away from any forest. No harvest had recently taken place.

I wonder what set them off?

Right now, that didn't matter. His priority was to get back to his own regiment undetected. But how far was he from the front lines? He tried to recall the moment transport occurred—the highest point before his descent. Did he see the forest's edge while tumbling down? He let out a curt sigh, shaking his head. Sky and endless treetops were all he could recall. As far as he knew, there

was no limit on distance when transporting someone. He'd been trained in survival scenarios such as this, but to be suddenly thrust into it had him questioning his confidence in his abilities.

He pushed those negative thoughts from his mind and pushed onward. Certainly, the attack on the camp and the failed transport would be reported. How long would headquarters wait before assuming he was dead? He envisioned his mother being told the news—that her only remaining son had been taken by the war, just like her husband and other two sons. He had to get home before they told her Callum was gone.

The topography he travelled now wasn't flat, instead an ongoing range of rolling hills. The broad canopy stopped ground vegetation from growing, but reconnoitring the area was onerous due to the terrain. Upon reaching the peak of one hill, he referred to the compass again to confirm his heading. He impressed himself by being only slightly off course, but that was bound to happen while traversing this terrain. After placing the compass around his neck, he glanced up, endeavouring to spot the sun's position. While the canopy still made it impossible to see directly, the light's colour asserted there were only a few hours of daylight left. It was probably best to set up camp early and continue at first light. He chided himself for not keeping an eye out for berries or nuts while travelling. Attempting to trap an animal was not an option. He'd never mastered that skill, and never had the opportunity to practise. During the past hour, he had passed no streams or creeks, but he knew the canteen in his rucksack was half full, and he was bound to find water tomorrow.

The breeze shifted, bringing with it an unexpected whiff of sweet woodsmoke from the east. He dropped to a knee, heedfully searching for the source of a fire. *Could it be one of the other troopers? Who else would be out here in the middle of nowhere?* Regardless, he wasn't about to repeat his earlier mistake by calling out. Careful to step silently and avoid twigs underfoot, he made his way down the hill toward another crest. Reaching the summit did little to help. A few fallen trees allowed for sunlight to hit the forest floor, enabling scrubby bushes to grow in its wake. Sensing the smoke was emerging from that direction, he crept along the decline to find a way around the brush.

He came upon a small clearing with a low-burning campfire on the far side. Nobody was in sight, nor could he hear anyone in the

encompassing woods. It felt like a trap, but to what end? He crouched low and skirted along the clearing's edge, cautiously approaching the fire. It was newly lit, with a small pile of collected deadwood and branches nearby to keep it fed. He dropped to a knee and scanned the depths of the forest for any sign of its owner—torn between the risk of staying in hopes it belonged to a fellow trooper, or fleeing in trepidation knowing a pactrid had built it.

Before he could decide, a snapping branch behind him broke his thoughts. He twisted his body in fright—facing whoever was there—however the momentum caused him to lose his balance, falling on his butt. Twenty paces away stood what he feared most. The pactrid appeared as surprised as Callum felt, and for a moment, time held still. Easily double Callum's height and thick all over—if the pactrid reached him, he'd be dead.

Callum found his nerve and scrambled to his feet, running in the opposite direction into the clearing. The pactrid, holding two dead hares in hand—likely his supper—dropped them and gave chase. The heavy footfalls of the pactrid's stump-like feet closed in at terrifying speed, astonishing given his size. Upon reaching the far side of the clearing, Callum risked a glance over his shoulder. There was no way he'd outrun this monster. His only hope was heading for dense brush to impede the pursuer's advance. Ducking under low branches and sidestepping around trees worked, but only temporarily before the pactrid—grunting heavy breaths—gained on him. A meaty hand lashed out and smacked Callum off his feet, slamming him into a tree.

Dazed for only a moment, Callum scrambled on his hands and knees, trying to gain purchase to pull himself up again. But his efforts were in vain. A hand grabbed his uniform, lifted him off his feet, and held him against the tree, level with the pactrid's angry eyes. Before Callum could plead for his life, the pactrid's fist struck him square in the head.

Everything went black.

• • •

Callum followed the soldier through a dank stone hallway with high ceilings. Broad metal doors, mottled with rust from the sea air,

came at regular intervals. It made sense everything was so large, given the height and size of pactrids. His stomach fluttered nervously at the thought of standing in the same room with one.

This was his first day as an interpreter. During his tenure at the academy, instructors had lauded his grasp of the pactrid language. He'd passed their many tests. But now, he didn't feel ready to actually speak to a pactrid, and translate back and forth with an interrogator.

His other skill—much to his surprise—was as a medic. While he didn't make top of his class, he took to the vocation better than most of his peers. The idea of helping someone in pain, or saving the life of a fellow trooper, brought a sense of pride. Simply giving a modicum of hope to another man felt important. This damned, endless war needed every spark of optimism he could give.

Despite his nervousness at being either an interpreter or medic, he was glad he escaped being part of the infantry. It was no secret the death toll was high. That was one reason he decided to be an interpreter. While terribly pathetic to consider, the position meant he was unlikely to be near the front lines. If he could make it through his seven years of conscription without ever being in the field, he'd selfishly take it.

"Here we are," the soldier announced, turning a lever on a metal door, and then pulling it open. It squeaked and groaned in protest, revealing a dimly lit stone room. A narrow horizontal slit on the far wall let in a sliver of cold, overcast sky. The only other light source was a brazier burning in the corner.

But what caught his attention sat in the centre of the room. A pactrid, unconscious with his head leaning forward, had been stripped naked. Callum blushed at the sight—the pactrid was most certainly male. His grey skin, completely hairless, appeared rough with deep creases at every fold. Massive ears draped the sides of his head, and a long trunk of a nose reached as far as his belly. The last oddity was his feet. They flared out and ended in stumps. How they managed to stand and keep their balance baffled him.

The chair he sat upon was a weighty cast-iron block bolted to the floor. Sturdy appendages acted as arm rests, ending with giant bands on a hinge and locked with stout pins. The pactrid's wrists were securely bound there, as were his ankles, with their own set of manacles.

Still standing within the doorway's threshold, Callum felt a

nudge from the soldier, urging him to enter the room. Callum did so reluctantly. The soldier followed and closed the door, standing guard beside it.

"We're still waitin' on the inquisitor."

Callum jumped at the voice to his left. In the shadows stood a man by a table. Judging by his garb—a wide leather apron and hardy gloves—he must be the one who performed the dirty work. The table held an array of frightful-looking tools. Implements of torture. Callum couldn't help but grimace, knowing the pain they could inflict, but this was the cost for his safety away from the front lines. Anyway, these were being used on the enemy. If it meant good intel to save the lives of others, his discomfort was of little consequence.

"No matter," the man continued. "Still waitin' for the big fellow to wake, yeah?"

Callum nodded in reply as the man drew near.

"You're lookin' a li'l green there, friend. You okay?"

"Uh, it's my first day," Callum muttered while timidly scratching the back of his head.

The man let out a gruff cackle and knocked Callum's shoulder in what he probably considered a friendly hello. "New blood, eh? Well, don't sweat it, friend. It's messy work, but whatev'r happens to the big guy here ain't anything to worry about. Name's Elias Thake."

"Callum Hidaro."

"Nice to meet ya, Callum. And hey, if you do your job and get him to talk, I can just sit back and watch, yeah?"

"I'll do my best."

Elias gave him an encouraging nod. "There's a good boy."

Callum bristled at being called 'boy'. He was nineteen; he was a man. But after another glance at Elias—who must be well into his thirties, career military—Callum supposed he still resembled a kid to him.

A knock at the door—a hollow, resonant sound—had the soldier spring to attention. He turned the lever and pushed the door open, revealing a man wearing an especially crisp uniform. Despite being clad in the same attire, Callum felt shabby in comparison. Even Elias straightened his stance.

"Interpreter Hidaro, I presume?" the new arrival said.

Callum saluted. "Yes, sir."

“I am Inquisitor Wenley. A pleasure to meet you. I’ve been told you’re quite adept at the pactrid language.”

“Yes, I suppose, sir.” Callum found it difficult to meet Wenley’s severe eyes.

“I understand this is your first day—a trial by fire, I reckon.” Wenley turned his attention to Elias. “Subaltern Thake. Wake the beast.”

“Yes, sir.” Elias reached into a bag hanging from the wall and retrieved a small packet. Stepping toward the unconscious pactrid, he broke the packet open and held it to the end of the long trunk-like nose.

The result was immediate. The pactrid stirred awake, blinking in confusion. Upon realising his predicament, he pulled mightily on the manacles holding him down. Callum flinched back at the savage display. Muscles bulged as the prisoner fought against the restraints—eliciting a faint chuckle from Elias—but it was immediately apparent the pactrid’s strength was no match for the chair.

“Interpreter Hidaro, I would like you to repeat the following to our guest: you have been detained because we have reason to believe you have information that interests us.”

Callum spoke those words to the prisoner. The pactrid glanced in surprise to hear his language spoken by a human, but upon comprehending what was to come, he instead stared ahead at the far wall. Wenley continued his dry speech in short sections, allowing time for Callum to translate to the now stone-faced pactrid. There were questions about troop numbers and their movement, ambush tactics, and asking for details about their campaign.

Predictably, the pactrid remained silent when given a chance to talk.

“Subaltern Thake, you may begin your craft.”

Elias approached the pactrid and slipped one end of a small device—a metal ring—onto the prisoner’s sausage-thick index finger. The other side was connected to the giant cuff holding his wrist, and in the centre was a ratchet. It became clear to Callum what was about to happen, and he cringed at the image in his mind’s eye. Elias attached a wrench to the mechanism and began to turn—the gear movement punctuated by loud clicks. It pulled the pactrid’s finger up and his hand followed, but soon the wrist restraint made it impossible for his hand to continue, straining the

finger backward.

"Hidaro, please make it clear to our guest that this interrogation will end if he answers our questions," Wenley said.

Callum nodded and took a few steps toward the pactrid. Meanwhile, Elias continued to apply deliberate pressure on the finger.

"This isn't going to be pleasant," Callum said in the pactrid's language. This earned him another glance from the towering brute, but there was no reply. "If you answer our questions, there'll be no more pain."

The pactrid's straight face hesitantly took on a smile, but there was no humour in his eyes. This smile was an acceptance of his fate. He knew there was no way out.

"You may proceed, Thake," Wenley said.

Elias adjusted his grip on the wrench and turned. The click of the ratchet, torture in its own right, slowed as the finger flexed to its fullest extent. And then Elias turned more. Callum averted his gaze, but couldn't escape the terrible crack and crunch of breaking bone and cartilage echoing off the stone walls. His stomach lurched and he felt lightheaded. The pactrid held his tongue—an amazing testament to his will—although his breathing had quickened.

"Hidaro, remind our guest of our wants, if you please," Wenley said, seemingly unaffected by the grotesque violence that just took place.

Callum repeated the statement to the pactrid that the pain would end if he cooperated. This time, the prisoner ignored him, keeping his eyes ahead. Elias pulled the ring off the limp, ruined finger, then switched hands to attach the device to the pactrid's middle digit. He forcefully ratcheted up the tension, having the finger on the cusp of breaking.

"Please," Callum insisted urgently to the pactrid, "just tell us what we want."

Upon receiving no reply, Elias turned the wrench at an excruciatingly slow rate, allowing each crack to linger, bringing renewed pain with each click of the gear. This had the desired effect. For the first time, the pactrid uttered a groan. Given the strain in his voice, it was clear he was trying his best to remain silent. Callum kept his eyes closed. The second time wasn't any easier for him, either.

Elias tugged the device free from the torn finger, then

contemplated a moment before returning to his table. While he rummaged, Callum approached the pactrid.

"I don't know what's planned for you next, but I can guarantee it's only going to get worse. I'm begging you, just tell us what we ask."

The pactrid turned his attention back to him, and to Callum's astonishment, he saw sorrow in his eyes. Not for himself, but for Callum.

"You poor child."

His deep voice, proud and dignified in defiance of his situation, pierced Callum's heart. *What am I doing here?*

"I'm sorry you have to endure this," the pactrid continued, "but I cannot give what you ask. To do so would betray all those I love. I am one. They are many. My pain, my death, is a small price to pay." The prisoner had a curious accent, although Callum supposed this was the accent of a native pactrid.

Wenley waited until the pactrid finished before asking, "What did he say?"

Callum turned to Wenley. "What happens if he cooperates?"

"We end the pain. We kill him," Wenley replied matter-of-factly. "Now, what did he say?"

"He doesn't care if you hurt or kill him."

Wenley grunted with a smile. "They often say that, but trust me, we can break him. He'll talk. Thake, it would seem your work is cut out for you today."

Elias, still at his table deliberating what tool to use next, instead looked to the wall and lifted a cumbersome iron mallet hanging there. "Breakin' knees works well for those more stubborn 'trids."

Wenley nodded his approval. "Proceed."

Callum turned back to the prisoner. "Just tell me something, anything. I don't care if it's a lie. It only has to sound convincing."

The pactrid shook his head. "This war between us has raged for over one hundred cycles. My pain is meagre compared to the countless others who have already died."

"But why go through all this pain for nothing?"

"You're too young to comprehend the scope of this war. Do you understand why we fight?"

"Pactrids invade our lands! We're just trying to protect what's ours!" Even without understanding the conversation, the tone of

Callum's voice told Wenley and Elias something was wrong.

The prisoner hung his head in disappointment. "You had a glimmer of promise, child, but you—like all your kind—are hopeless. I intend for my death to haunt your dreams."

"What is he saying?" Wenley demanded.

Callum opened his mouth to speak but was at a loss for words. He could only shake his head.

"Step aside," Elias said, hefting the heavy mallet menacingly. "I'll get 'im talking soon enough." He lined up the mallet to the pactrid's knee as one would an axe to a tree, wound up, and swung with all his might.

• • •

Callum woke in a confused state. With great effort, he focused on the pactrid by the fire, cleaning the two hares he'd caught. His jaw throbbed, and the taste of tangy copper had him spit out blood. There was a tightness across his chest. He found himself sitting on the ground with his legs splayed out, tied to a tree with sturdy rope. His hands were bound uncomfortably behind his back. The pactrid either hadn't noticed him awaken or didn't care, and Callum used the opportunity to observe him.

His clothing—a mix of linen and leather layers—was simple and muted in colour. Nothing like the armoured troops at the front lines. Instead of protective boots, his stump-like feet were wrapped in a thick fabric. From what he was told, pactrids didn't need to don footwear, but Callum supposed the forest floor could be hazardous even to pactrid feet.

Despite his thick fingers, the pactrid was surprisingly nimble with his work. He'd finished dressing the hares, speared them onto a long branch, and turned them over the low fire—mostly hot coals now. The pactrid took this moment to glance in Callum's direction, but said nothing before returning his attention to cooking.

"What do you intend to do with me?" Callum asked.

The pactrid's head whirled back upon hearing him speak, causing his trunk to follow in a whipping motion. He stared for an uncomfortable length of time, appraising him before finally speaking. "How do you know my language?" His demanding voice

was deep and resonant, yet strangely intriguing.

"I was taught in school, however I don't know how we gained the knowledge in the first place." *We probably learnt your language from prisoners of war.* He wasn't about to say that part aloud, though.

The pactrid snorted. "Your kind—you always take without permission."

"You didn't answer my question. What will you do with me?"

"You're in no position to ask questions, human. Do you have a pass?"

"What do you mean? A pass for what?"

The pactrid turned back to the fire. "You've answered my question."

"I don't even know where I am."

"Silence."

Callum sighed. There was nothing to gain in starting an argument, so he kept quiet. Dusk came gradually—an imperceptible shift of colour and light. Birdsong dwindled, giving way to the shrill chirp of night insects. The scent of cooking hare wafted toward him, causing his stomach to growl. Even before crossing paths with his captor, he'd assumed he wouldn't be eating today. But that smell, and the sound of juices hitting the hot coals—so tantalisingly close, it tormented him.

The pactrid inspected and poked the meat for doneness, then pulled one hare off the spear and took a bite. Given the pactrid's size, the hare was more like a snack than a meal to him, and he finished it quickly. Callum's mouth watered as he watched him tear into the second hare. The pactrid could likely feel Callum's eyes upon him, and he turned to speak.

"Are you hungry?"

Callum nodded hesitantly. The pactrid stabbed the half-eaten hare back on the spear and leaned it against a stone to keep it off the ground. Wiping his greasy fingers on his trousers, he lumbered toward him and crouched. Callum couldn't help flinch away as he reached toward him.

"Calm yourself," the pactrid said. "I'm going to untie your hands, but don't make me regret it."

He made simple work of the knots, and once free, Callum rubbed his wrists as best he could. The ropes across Callum's chest didn't allow his arms much free movement. The pactrid retrieved

the speared hare and tore one leg off, dropping it into Callum's open hand. With the restraints holding him firm, Callum had to stretch his neck down to eat. The small morsel wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

"Thank you."

His captor stared back through narrow eyes. "Don't interpret this as a kindness. We will be travelling tomorrow and you will need your strength."

Callum decided to ask his first question in a different manner. "How far?"

The pactrid stood, looming over him. "Given your size, I can't say. It would take me three days. How swiftly can you travel?"

"Fast enough, I guess," Callum replied.

"You will be leashed. I'll drag you if I must."

The pactrid devoured the remaining meat, then added more fuel to the fire.

"Where are we?" Callum asked.

That earned him a scowl, which shut him up quick. Once his captor saw he was going to remain silent, he lay down on his side using an arm as a pillow—his view in line with Callum's position. It's not as though Callum could escape. The multiple layers of rope were tight, and the pactrid had stripped him of his utility knife and rucksack. He had left the compass around his neck, though. He could feel it against his skin. Either the pactrid hadn't found it, or assumed it wasn't useful for an escape. That's when Callum saw his belongings sitting against a nearby tree alongside the pactrid's own satchel. He regarded the late evening sky—inky blue against a sea of stars. The wind had died down, the trees silent. He tried to adjust his position to lean back against the tree trunk, but his restraints were too tight.

It was going to be a long night.

TWO

A Wary Travel Companion

A sudden kick to Callum's outstretched legs caused him to jerk awake. The pactrid stood there, glaring at him in the near dark. Morning had only just broken.

"Wake up, human. We're leaving."

The last night had lasted forever. It'd been impossible to get comfortable, and while it felt like he'd been awake all night, exhaustion must've finally taken over. To his surprise, Callum found himself untied—the rope now in his captor's hands. Sitting upright all night had resulted in a numb butt, and yesterday's fall through the trees had brought aching, tender bruises. His swollen and sore face—the result of the pactrid's fist for trying to escape—only added to his pain. He felt like an old man trying to rise from bed. Using the tree for stability, he pulled himself up. A minor victory. Without a word, the pactrid wrapped the length of rope around Callum's waist, then roughly turned him around to tie a knot at his back. Callum would've fallen over from the rough treatment had the pactrid not been keeping a tight hold on him.

“I won’t bind your hands since we’ll be travelling on uneven ground, but don’t you dare think of running,” the pactrid said.

Callum eyed his rucksack lying on the ground. “I’m thirsty. There’s a canteen of water in my sack.”

The pactrid retrieved the canteen, then rifled through his belongings, but found nothing that could aid Callum’s escape. He’d already taken Callum’s knife, but that was nowhere to be seen. Stuffing everything in again and strapping it closed—those curiously thick yet dexterous fingers continued to baffle Callum—he handed the sack for him to carry on his back, as well as the canteen.

“No need to ration what you have,” the pactrid said. “We will cross a stream soon.”

Taking his advice, Callum drank greedily, slaking his thirst. All the while, the pactrid watched and waited patiently for him to fasten the empty canteen to his belt. Callum nodded his thanks, to which the pactrid imparted a near imperceptible nod in return.

“Which way are we going?” Callum asked.

“The eastern path,” the pactrid replied, pointing at the forest.

“There’s a path there?”

“No more talk, human.”

Rope in hand, his captor took the lead with wide, heavy steps, forcing Callum to keep a pace slightly faster than a walk. Although the pactrid mentioned a path, Callum couldn’t see anything that resembled one. The brisk walk helped ease the tense ache in his legs, though—a minor triumph, despite the situation.

His captor was true to his word. A few hours into their trek, they came upon a rushing stream. While the pactrid filled his waterskin, Callum fell to his knees, huffing for breath. He’d worked up a sweat, causing the cuts on his face to sting. Dipping his hands into the cool water felt wonderful, and he splashed it onto his face, bringing grateful relief. He lay flat on his belly and submerged his head, welcoming the numbing water as it washed across his bruised face.

The idea of stripping down to bathe in the chilly water crossed his mind, but no doubt his captor wouldn’t approve of the wasted time. As though in response, Callum felt a tug on the rope, and he pulled his head out of the water.

“What are you doing?” the pactrid asked.

Callum ran a hand through his hair to wring the excess water away. “My face hurts. The water makes it feel a little better.”

“You shouldn’t have run from me,” the pactrid said with a frown. “You forced my hand.”

Callum scoffed. “Of course I ran. I thought you were going to kill me.”

“How did you cut your face? I didn’t do that.”

“I, uh—I fell through the trees.”

“You were climbing?”

“Not quite.”

Callum received a narrowed-eye stare. “Fill your canteen. We continue.”

While Callum did so, he glanced back up at the pactrid. “May I ask your name?”

“I see no point in giving it.”

“Well, my name is Callum.”

The pactrid took a moment to process the unfamiliar word before attempting to speak it aloud. “Cal’oom.”

“Close enough,” Callum muttered in his own tongue while capping his canteen.

“I don’t speak your language,” the pactrid said, tugging on the rope again. “Come, now. Let’s go.”

They crossed the stream and continued east toward the rising sun. Callum caught up to walk alongside the pactrid.

“You know my name. Why not tell me yours? What harm could come from it?”

His captor stared down at him. “Why is this important to you?”

“I might be your prisoner, but you have to admit this is a strange situation we’re in, isn’t it?”

“I don’t understand.”

“If it wasn’t for this rope, we could just be travellers.”

“But we’re not travellers. We’re enemies. You’re my prisoner.”

Callum huffed in frustration. “Yes, we’re enemies. That’s understood. But we’re enemies because of this war. Do you want this war between our kind?”

The pactrid stopped and turned his full attention toward Callum. “No.”

Callum raised his hands in frustration. “I don’t want it, either. I never have.” *It’s strangely liberating to say that aloud after all this time.*

“You humans chose to invade our lands, take what was ours,” the pactrid said, gesturing to the trees.

“What are you talking about? You’re invading *our* lands! We’re trying to take back what belongs to us.”

The pactrid shook his head in frustration. “Our lands are separated by the Spine. Humans travelled south across it and began taking from us over one hundred cycles ago.”

“The Spine?”

“Yes, the mountain range that separates our lands,” he said, gesturing toward the north.

Callum frowned in confusion. “What mountains?”

The pactrid let out a contemptible sigh. “You really are an *aljaru*, aren’t you.”

“*Aljaru*? What is that?”

“An animal. Small, young, inexperienced.”

“What? Like a young dog? A *pup*?”

“Pup,” the pactrid said, seeming to derive enjoyment by repeating it a few times. “Yes. A *pup*.”

“I’m not that young.”

“To me, you are.”

“You can’t be much older than me,” Callum said. “I’m twenty-two.”

This fact caused the pactrid to chuckle—a subdued rumbling deep within his chest. “Come along, pup,” he said, tugging lightly on the rope, but Callum held his ground.

“What’s so funny? How old are *you*?”

The pactrid turned to give him a smirk. “I have lived one hundred and thirty-four cycles. So yes, you are a pup.”

Callum’s mouth stood agape as he stumbled along in the pactrid’s wake. “Are you saying you were alive before the war started?”

“Yes. Unlike you, I have witnessed how it began. No secondhand accounts. Humans provoked this war when they invaded *our* land.”

Callum had so many questions, but didn’t know where to start. Was this even true? Was the pactrid trying to deceive him? At least he’d managed to get his captor to speak more than a few sentences. No sense pushing the conversation any further and losing the few crumbs of cordiality he’d garnered, even if they were laced with mocking bitterness.

“My name is Rymolnd,” the pactrid stated after a moment of silence.

Callum repeated it out loud, finding it difficult to pronounce. This brought a grunt of displeasure from his captor, and he stopped to face him again.

"My friends call me Rym."

"Are we friends?" Callum asked, glowering.

"No, but I'd rather you call me Rym than hear you disrespect my proper name."

That said, he continued walking with another tug on the rope. Callum was growing weary of being led this way, but what troubled him more thoroughly was not knowing their destination. If he didn't get answers by nightfall, he'd make his escape while the pactrid slept. Staying with Rym or setting out in unknown lands—both had their risks, but Callum knew he'd have a better chance of survival by fleeing.

Over the course of an hour, the forest changed dramatically. Thick, gnarled roots dug into the ground, holding up the ancient monolithic trees reaching for the sky. He felt incredibly tiny amid these giants. Moss and lichen adorned rough bark. Soft mist hung in the air, catching narrow beams of sunlight. Callum envisioned the awed faces of the woodcutters if they saw this, imagining the amount of wood they could harvest. But the idea of cutting down these trees struck him as profoundly wrong, giving Callum pause to understand why. This place felt sacred somehow.

Rym glanced up at the scenery, appreciating their surroundings as well. Callum's curiosity almost had him ask about this part of the forest, but he kept his mouth shut. There was nothing to gain. Only Rym's biting remarks to endure should Callum say the wrong thing. He supposed there was no point in trying to talk reason with his captor. One thing stood out to him, though. Rym didn't want this war. That was one item of commonality between them. But if what Rym said was true—as hard as it was to believe Anberans were the cause of this century-long war—Callum felt vindicated to not want any part of it, either. Presumably other people like Callum existed—those who had no stomach for the fight—but given the danger of speaking such thoughts, it was impossible to know the truth.

The day wore on, trudging along an invisible trail only Rym could recognise. Callum had surreptitiously pulled out his compass to keep track of their direction, which was generally east. Obstacles would sometimes force them to skirt around in a northern or

southern fashion, but they always lined up back east as soon as they were able. Luckily, Rym hadn't kept the rapid pace established at the start of the day, but now, Callum was feeling faint. His stomach growled, seemingly loud enough for Rym to notice.

"We stop for a rest?" the pactrid asked.

Callum nodded. "Please?"

Rym grunted in agreement and sat on the ground against a tree. They both drank their water and sat in silence to catch their breath.

"Do you have anything to eat?" Callum asked.

This earned him a stare of condescension. "What kind of scout carries such a large bag and doesn't have food? A terrible one."

"Who said I was a scout?"

Rym gestured at their surroundings. "A human this deep in our lands could only be a scout. It's plenty obvious you're no soldier."

"I'm a field medic."

"You . . . heal fields?" Rym asked, giving him a comical stare of confusion.

Callum realised the direct translation of those two words made little sense, and he couldn't help cracking a smile. "I'm a medic who works on the battlefield."

Rym stood unconvinced. "You're remarkably far from any battlefield, medic Cal'oom. Tell me, what are you doing here?"

Maybe I can finally get some answers. "If you share with me where we're headed, I'll tell you how I got here."

The pactrid stared at him. There was no malice or scorn, only assessment. Callum held his gaze. Not as an act of hostility, just to observe how he would react. A silver sheen in Rym's eyes, sparkling in the dappled sunlight, held his attention.

"You're a curious human," Rym said. "I will admit, you are not what I expected." He dug a hand into his satchel, pulled out something wrapped in cloth, broke off a piece, and handed it to Callum. It looked like hardtack. "Use water to soften it, unless you enjoy excessively crunchy food."

What resembled a small portion held in Rym's fingers was a sizeable, weighty mass in Callum's hand. Callum gave it a cursory sniff, but it had no odour. Given its size, trying to take a bite out of it seemed unlikely, so he took Rym's advice and poured a bit of water into the broken side. He waited a moment, allowing it to soften, and then took a bite. In any other situation, he would've spit

it out—not because of the taste, but the mushy, slightly slimy texture. But he was too hungry to complain, and given his bruised jaw, the softness was appreciated. He swallowed and took another bite. It didn't seem as bad this time.

"Thank you," he said.

Rym, eating his own ration dry, followed by a slug of water, offered a nod in reply. While they continued to eat in silence, Callum was disappointed his ruse to extract information from Rym had failed. *It doesn't matter. I'll escape tonight. Except how am I going to cut these ropes?* He had no idea where his utility knife went. Rym had taken it, but was he carrying it in his satchel, or did he toss it? Strapped to Rym's leg was his own knife, although the size was akin to a shortsword. That wasn't an option, though. There was no chance Callum could slip it from its sheath and cut his bonds without Rym noticing.

Breaking his thoughts, Rym stood up and motioned for Callum to do the same. Their break was over, but that was fine. The chunk of hardtack had sated his hunger, hopefully enough to keep him going until nightfall. They continued east through the ancient, sacred forest for another few hours—Rym leading, with Callum in tow.

The biome changed gradually—rocky outcroppings replacing soft, mossy ground. The towering trees couldn't grow in this region, allowing for smaller, more delicate flora to take root. And for the first time since his arrival, large patches of sunshine managed to reach the ground and touch his face. It was then he realised the forest had kept the temperature cool and comfortable. Out in the open air, the weather was warmer than expected. A few light clouds lingered, but the sky was otherwise clear.

The path Rym followed was more obvious to Callum now. It comprised of crushed rock and compressed dirt. He supposed the loam of the forest was spongy in comparison, masking the trail from his inexperienced eyes. A stone underfoot caught his attention—sharp-edged and small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. But before he could consider making a move to grab it, he'd lost his chance, having already walked past it. Focusing beyond Rym, he spied another stone in the distance. He closed the space between them furtively, taking up the slack on the rope leash to give himself a few extra steps. But as he reached the stone, it was too rounded and didn't have a cutting edge. He swore under his breath while

searching for another potential candidate.

To his dismay, the rocky path gave way to pure dirt. His eyes darted about at the scant remaining rocks in hopes of finding something—anything—that could cut. To the right, he caught sight of something. It was small, but if it had a cutting edge, it'd be good enough. Deftly swapping the rope to his left hand, he leaned down, scooped up the stone, and slipped it into his right pocket.

As silent and perfect the manoeuvre had been, something had tipped Rym off. He stopped and turned suddenly to find Callum holding the rope, and his other hand still in his pocket.

"What are you doing, pup?"

Callum dropped the rope and the extra slack hit the ground. "What? Nothing," he blurted out, feeling his face redden.

Rym stared at him—a look that bore right through him. Callum tried to return the intense stare, but found the silver, penetrating eyes too much to withstand and he lowered his gaze.

"Don't touch the rope," Rym said, his voice rumbling in warning.

"It was, um . . . dragging," Callum replied lamely.

"Touch it again, and I'll have it leashed around your neck like an actual *aljaru*."

This was the first time Rym's voice had risen in anger. Callum flinched, then lifted his hands to show he understood the consequences. *Night can't come soon enough. I gotta get away from him.* The pactrid exhaled a huff from his trunk, then gave the rope a harsh yank, causing Callum to nearly fall over.

Rym hastened the pace, forcing Callum to a plodding jog in order to keep up. After a few minutes, Callum risked pulling the stone free from his pocket to give it a closer inspection. While it wasn't like the slim, sharp rock he'd seen before, this one still had an edge. It'd take longer to cut, but he felt confident it'd do the job.

The pactrid's angry gait eased off after half an hour. No doubt he heard Callum being short of breath. Despite Rym's warning that morning, it was unlikely he wanted to waste his energy by literally dragging him. Regardless of the reason, Callum was thankful, but didn't hazard saying a word. There was no point in strengthening his captor's ire any further.

With the setting sun at their back, Rym's momentum eased while he scouted left and right. He continued on the path a few minutes longer, then led Callum through a gap in the thicket.

“We’ll make camp here,” Rym announced as they came upon a negligible clearing amid the trees. He knelt down and gestured for Callum to approach, but as soon as he was within reach, Rym turned him around and pulled his rucksack off. “Give me your hands.”

Callum turned his head in confusion. “What? Why?”

That earned him a tug on his arm. “You ask too many questions, pup.” Rym grabbed Callum’s other arm and roughly lashed them together behind his back.

“Please,” Callum pleaded, “you don’t need to do this.”

“Yes, I do. I’m going to hunt for our supper, but I can’t do that and watch you at the same time.” He pulled him backward toward the nearest tree. “Sit!”

Callum obeyed, and Rym tied the remaining length of rope to the tree, making sure to keep the knot out of reach on the far side.

“But I’m defenceless,” Callum said. “Are their preying animals here?”

Rym inspected the knots again before replying. “Yes, but—”

“You can’t leave me here,” Callum cried.

“The wolves won’t be out yet. It’s too early still.”

“Rym . . . please.”

His captor stood and scanned the area before turning his attention back to Callum. “I won’t be long, pup—”

“Don’t call me that!” Callum said through bared teeth.

Rym ignored the outburst and headed into the brush, beyond Callum’s vision. Once the heavy footfalls were no longer audible, Callum tugged and twisted at the bonds around his wrists. The rope burnt against his skin, but he didn’t care. Profanities tumbled from his lips as he continued to push and pull, trying to create a modicum of slack or to loosen his bindings, but it made no difference.

He was undoubtedly trapped here, and despite everything he’d gone through before—forced into the academy, forced to take part in this damned war—never had he felt so powerless. His throat tightened, as though the rope was around his neck. He found it difficult to catch his breath. *What if Rym loses track of where I am? I’ll die like this.* Callum screamed out his captor’s name, but there was no reply, nor any sign of the pactrid. Prickling sweat beaded on his face as he screamed again, making himself hoarse. Still no response. He gasped, but no amount of air pulled into his lungs

helped. White spots flashed before his eyes. Blinking did nothing. His hands turned numb, tingling. Lightheaded and confused, he felt he might faint.

Something thrashed from the bushes toward him. He shut his eyes, flinching away as best he could, still fighting against the bonds.

"What's wrong, Cal'oom?" Rym's voice carried a legitimate air of concern, but Callum could only barely register that. "You're pale," Rym continued. "What happened?"

Callum refused to open his eyes. The heavy pulse throbbing in his ears abated, and he managed to control his breathing. Having not received a response, Rym crouched before him. Using a thumb, he nudged the sweat-soaked hair from Callum's eyes.

"Don't touch me!" Callum cried, turning his head away from Rym's touch. "Please. Untie me."

Without a word, Rym set himself to action, untying the knot from the tree and then freeing Callum's hands. The rope around his waist remained, but Callum wasn't about to complain about that. He tried to stand, but found his legs unable to support his weight and crumpled to the ground.

"What's wrong with you?" Rym asked.

"I don't know . . ." Callum wiped the sweat from his face. "I was worried you'd forget where I was. You left me defenceless against the wolves."

Rym let out a long sigh and shook his head with a smirk. "I'm a scout and tracker. I would have never lost your location. And I told you, they come out later to hunt. At dusk."

"It's pretty damn close to dusk," Callum said, gesturing at the golden light through the canopy.

Rym glanced at the sunlight for a moment, then dismissed his concern with a wave of the hand. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Just let me go," Callum replied scant above a whisper. "I'm no threat to you, or any pactrid."

"No, you're not, but that's no reason to free you."

Callum shot Rym an angry glare. "Why?"

"You are my enemy, thus my prisoner."

"So, where are you taking me?"

Rym considered the question—those scrutinising eyes digging deep into Callum's being. "I'm taking you to a *gotachi*."

Yet another word Callum had never heard, let alone understood. “What is that?”

“Not what. Who. A *gotachi* asks questions and can read one’s intent.”

“Like an inquisitor?” Callum’s stomach turned speaking that word aloud, even in the pactrid’s language.

“They sense a person’s true motives.”

Callum held out his hands in pleading. “My motives? I’ve already told you I want nothing to do with his war.”

“That may be true. It may not. Words can be deceitful.” Rym gently poked Callum’s chest. “The truth comes from here.”

Callum couldn’t fault him on that, but the prospect of being on the receiving side of an interrogator left him anxious. “Then what happens?”

Rym shrugged. “That all depends on you, I suppose.” The tone of his voice, as well as the vagueness of his words, brought an icy shiver up Callum’s spine. “Now, will you allow me to finish what I started without you alerting all the animals?”

The idea of being tied to the tree again had Callum sink his head pitifully. “Let me come with you. I’ll be quiet.”

“You mistook my meaning. I wasn’t giving you a choice.”

“Fine, but just . . . don’t tie my hands?”

Rym gave him a dark stare. “Do you think me a fool?”

“No, I only—”

With a tug on the rope, Rym pulled him close and bound his hands again. As soon as Callum voiced his discontent, Rym asked, “Do I need to gag you as well?”

Callum shook his head apprehensively, allowing Rym to tie him back to the tree. Once finished, Rym crouched before him again.

“Don’t panic, Cal’oom. I will not leave you here forgotten, nor will I lose your position.”

Callum cast his eyes down. A wave of exhaustion suddenly took over. Perhaps it was a culmination of poor sleep, walking all day, and now this sudden anxiety. Rym held there a moment, waiting for some kind of reply, but after realising he wouldn’t get one, uttered a grunt and left the campsite.

Just a few hours. Once he’s asleep, I’ll cut the rope and get out of here. These were the only thoughts granting Callum any hope. Escape felt doubly important now. Knowledge that Rym was taking

him to some kind of inquisitor brought on a wave of nausea. Who knew what terrible methods of torture they used to get answers. What was worse, Callum had nothing useful to tell. Would they believe him? And if not, would they keep hurting him until he succumbed to his wounds?

He hoped Rym would leave his hands free like the night before. Everything hinged on that tiny concession. But after witnessing Rym's anger from asking that request—*do you think me a fool?*—Callum was deeply concerned his chance at escape would be impossible. To dissuade Rym's lack of trust, Callum had to be as agreeable as possible. That was a fine thread to weave, though. It would be easy to push too far, causing the pactrid to grow suspicious.

Rym's responses left Callum perplexed. One minute, disdain and irritability. The next, fragments of empathy. Both felt genuine. As much as he hated to admit it, Rym's instances of kindness felt good. Was he so starved for an emotional connection that he'd accept it from an abusive pactrid?

The sun had fallen too low beyond the trees to know its true location, but night would be upon him soon. Callum could only trust Rym would find the camp. The panic from before felt like a distant memory, though. Now, acceptance washed over him. He had no control over his situation, and curiously, that truth acted as a balm for his nerves.

Muted footfalls—a ponderous rhythm Callum was growing accustomed to—announced Rym's arrival. The pactrid held four fish skewered on a roughly made spear. Callum's hunger suddenly came to the forefront. *It's time to put on a show.*

"I'm sorry about before," Callum said.

Rym rested the spear against a tree trunk, then moved to untie Callum's hands from his back. "I apologise as well, Cal'oom. This situation we find ourselves in is not ideal for either of us."

Callum was taken aback by the apology, but did his best to hide it. He didn't want to push his luck, so he silently watched Rym scour the immediate area for wood and kindling. The pactrid retrieved a flint and steel set from his satchel and soon had the beginnings of a fire started. He continued to gather more sticks and small fallen branches, adding them leisurely until the fire grew hot enough to cook.

"Earlier, you asked how I got here," Callum said while Rym

fetched the fish-laden spear and held it over the flames. “I offered to share that in exchange for information: where you’re taking me. You’ve told me we’re going to see a *gotachi*, so I’ll tell my story.”

Rym’s focus shifted between the fish and Callum, but judging by his inquisitive eyes, his curiosity was piqued. He nodded for Callum to begin.

“As I said before, I’m a medic. I’d just finished my shift and . . .” He realised pactrids might not have any knowledge of transporters. Was he about to share military secrets with the enemy? *Do I even care if they know?*

“And?” Rym prompted.

Callum sighed—he was in too deep to back away now. “Do you know how humans travel long distances?”

The pactrid gave him a peculiar look. “You walk?”

“No. We rely on people who have a special, innate talent. We call them *transporters*. I don’t know if you have this word in your language.”

Rym shrugged. “What do they do?”

“They move people great distances”—Callum snapped his fingers—“that quickly.”

It took a moment for the idea to sink in, but even then, Rym appeared confused. “How?”

“I’ll be honest. I have no idea.”

“And you can do this?”

A laugh escaped Callum’s lips. “No, they’re exceedingly rare. For every ten thousand humans, only one has the ability. I told you, I’m just a medic.”

There was another moment of contemplation before Rym asked, “They can move humans anywhere?” The concept concerned him.

“No. They need to have been there physically first. I think they thoroughly study the location and then recall it in their mind.”

“You were moved by a . . . *tramspurter*?”

Callum hid a smile at his attempt to say the word, but wasn’t about to try correcting his pronunciation. “Yes, but it failed. He was interrupted. When that happens, those who are moved get sent to random locations. I was delivered to the sky above this forest. I fell, but the trees stopped my fall enough that it didn’t kill me.”

Rym’s silver eyes glittered in the firelight, staring into space as he imagined it.

“I was never supposed to be here,” Callum continued. “It was an accident. I knew home was north, so I headed that way until I found your camp. You know the rest of the story.”

“The scratches on your face,” Rym said as he turned his attention back to the fish. “You got those from the fall through the trees.”

“Yes, but those pale in comparison to the punch you gave me.”

This time, instead of a frown, Rym gave him a remorseful look. “I’m sorry, Cal’oom.”

Another apology. “Let’s call it a misunderstanding?”

A hint of a smile crossed Rym’s lips, and he nodded. Callum found it curious how easy it was to get the pactrid into an agreeable mood. He needed to be careful, though. One wrong word could set the pactrid off and destroy the advancement he’d made so far. He decided to remain silent and let Rym take control of the conversation, but Rym seemed content in the silence, turning the fish over the fire to cook them evenly.

By the time their supper was ready, the sun was well below the horizon—the patches of sky visible through the trees were a deep blue. The rope around Callum’s chest was much less aggressively wrapped compared to the night before, and with his arms and hands free, eating the hot fish was a simple task. Rym ate the other three, which, given his size, was appropriate.

After he’d finished eating, Callum watched Rym from the corner of his eye, trying to decide the best time to ask for leniency about the rope. Perhaps he could take a different tack instead of asking outright.

“Rym, I slept really poorly last night. I understand you need to keep me tied up, but if you could keep my arms and hands free, and only have the rope across my chest—”

“No. I cannot risk you escaping.”

Callum could feel his ploy unravelling with each passing second. “I’ll admit when you first captured me, the thought of escape was on my mind. But now, I realise if I tried, I’d end up getting lost in this forest and probably die trying.”

The pactrid rose from his spot by the fire and approached him. “I have another idea.” He knelt before him and carefully laid his massive palm on Callum’s head. His warmth seeped into his skin, and Callum couldn’t deny the pleasure it brought.

“What are you doing?” Callum asked.

“I cannot leave your hands untied, but I can help you be more comfortable.”

Callum’s vision blurred a moment, and he blinked it clear again. “How?”

“Shh. Close your eyes. Don’t fight it,” Rym said as he stroked his head.

Callum ignored his words, mentally struggling against whatever was happening. His vision blurred again—eyelids fluttering in an attempt to remain alert, but whatever the pactrid was doing overpowered his ability to keep his eyes open. Breathing slowed, deepened. Rym’s warm hand stilled but remained resting on his head. The air changed—cooler, moist, earthy. Where Rym’s hand had been resting felt cold now. The weight of it, gone.

Callum opened his eyes. Rym sat cross-legged a few metres away, whittling a stick with his knife. Hints of sunlight weaved through the trees, but now coming from the east.

“What happened?” Callum’s voice cracked, as though he hadn’t spoken for days.

Rym glanced up and gave him a faint smile. “You’re awake. Good.” After tossing aside the stick and sheathing his knife, he untied Callum from the tree.

With every passing moment, Callum’s mind became more alert. Never had he felt this way before, like he could take on the world. “I don’t understand. What did you do to me?”

Rym helped him stand and then freed his hands from behind his back. “I helped you to sleep.”

“But it’s only been a few minutes.”

Rym scoffed. “For you, perhaps.”

“It’s morning.” He felt silly stating the obvious, but the loss of time was disorienting.

“Yes.” Rym tossed Callum’s rucksack at his feet. “Drink some water, then we go.”

It was at that moment Callum realised he’d lost his chance to escape. *Damn it!* Another day stuck on a leash. “Don’t you ever do that to me again.”

Rym’s eyes lit up in surprise, seemingly injured by Callum’s curt words, but it lasted only a moment before his features hardened to stare him down. “I was trying to help you. I’ll make sure to not repeat that mistake.”

Callum silently swore between his teeth. He needed Rym on

his side if he was ever going to get a chance to sneak away. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. I just—”

Rym pulled on the rope. “Let’s go, pup.”

• • •

The morning hours were long, quiet—painfully so. Once again, Callum had riled his captor, and now he was paying the price. He deliberated how to undo the damage he’d caused, but attempting to talk to Rym felt treacherous. It was only when they stopped to rest shortly past midday—crunching on hardtack—Callum noticed the pactrid had lost his gruff mood and was open to dialogue.

“Rym, I want to apologise again for what I said this morning. I was confused, and I guess a little frightened by what happened.”

The pactrid, sitting on a fallen log, stared back with those shimmering silver eyes. Finally, he granted a subtle nod in response, accepting the apology.

“How did you make me sleep like that?” Callum asked.

Rym took another bite of the crunchy hardtack and chewed while he considered the question. “Yesterday, I spoke of a *gotachi*—one who can read another’s intent. Their ability is not common. All pactrids can do the opposite, however. We can *gutach*.”

Yet another word Callum had never encountered, however he could identify the relationship between *gotachi* and *gutach* by their pronunciation. “So you can make others fall asleep?”

A chuckle escaped Rym’s lips. “There are many things we can do. And I didn’t *make* you fall asleep. I only suggested it.”

“You didn’t suggest anything. I just felt incredibly tired.”

“Yes. I suggested you were tired.”

“I don’t understand. How?”

Rym’s eyes pondered the landscape as he tried to come up with an answer. “Can you explain how breathing works? It simply comes naturally, yes? To *gutach* is the same as breathing.”

The concept of pushing an idea directly into someone’s mind—an act as easy as breathing—baffled Callum. Stranger still, it worked on humans. “What else can you do?”

“We can share thoughts and memories with others. Sometimes words fail to convey how you feel. There are no misunderstandings

when one communicates this way."

"I'd no idea such a thing could be possible," Callum mused quietly.

Rym shrugged. "How could you? I'm sure there are other facts we're ignorant of when it comes to humans. I didn't know your kind could travel in such a way."

A trace of doubt nibbled at the back of Callum's mind. Had he made a mistake in divulging that information? Rym had shared his own abilities, which could be a dangerous tool if used maliciously against another. Was anyone back home aware of this power?

Rym dusted his hands and stood. "Let's go. There's much land to cross this day, and I wish to reach Tadrie before night sets in too deeply."

Callum could've sworn Rym said it'd take three days to reach their destination. "Is Tadrie the *gotachi* you mentioned?"

"Tadrie isn't a person. It's a village we'll be passing through."

They continued their trek silently through the woods with Callum trailing behind, contemplating entering a village full of pactrids. He picked up the pace to walk side by side. "What about me?"

"What about you, pup?"

Callum ignored the unwelcome epithet, although he noted there was no ill intent in his voice now. "I can't follow you into the village. Won't I be attacked?"

"If you entered on your own, you'd be detained. But as long as you remain tethered and stay close to me, they'll understand you're my prisoner."

"Are humans a common enough sight? Human prisoners, I mean?"

"Neither common nor rare. Are you not told of missing soldiers?"

Callum had no idea what he was talking about, but wasn't about to state that fact. "Do you torture them for information?"

"You really are quite naïve—"

"I'm not!" Callum shut his mouth before he said something that would cause him trouble.

Rym glanced down at him again, no doubt catching the anger written on Callum's face. "Perhaps a poor word choice. I suppose your ignorance of this war between human and pactrid isn't entirely your fault. I suspect you humans haven't been told the truth,

possibly even fed lies."

"Lies about what?"

Rym let out a long sigh and shook his head, causing his trunk to waver left and right. "You believe you're fighting to regain your land, but it's our land you steal. Humans crossed the Spine—the border of our land."

"You keep talking about these mountains, but I've never seen any. No one's ever spoken of mountains between here and our home city."

"Then your people are lying to you. Your army has pushed so far south, the mountains to the north are beyond the horizon. Tell me, have you ever travelled the entire distance home, or do you only use those special people to move you?"

Rym was right. There were always at least two transporters on duty at every camp along the line. As far as he knew, it'd always been that way. Nobody ever travelled between the front lines to Anbera on foot. Why would they? But Callum couldn't accept they were the aggressors. Countless troopers died to protect their home, not to gain enemy territory. To keep such a ruse going—and for so long—would be impossible.

"You're just trying to mess with my head," Callum mumbled.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because we're enemies, remember?"

Rym grunted and shook his head again in disappointment, evidently done with the conversation. That was fine for Callum. He didn't want to hear any more of Rym's deceit.

The prospect of what was to come—entering a pactrid village—still made him nervous, though. Despite Rym's confidence he would be fine, it did nothing to bring Callum any comfort. What if they crossed a pactrid who'd lost a loved one in the war? Would they see a human under the protection of another pactrid, or would they see a human deserving death? Would Rym risk injury—even his own life—to protect Callum? Doubtful.

Over the course of the afternoon, their trail broke out from the boundless forest they'd been travelling through. They cut across numerous patches of grasslands studded with large copses. Wooden bridges—large to Callum's eye, but these were meant for pactrids—allowed access over winding streams.

As evening loomed, they crossed into a region of farmlands. Lesser-used footpaths gathered onto the track they followed,

widening the road as they went. Lines of crops flanked them, but no sign of any buildings or homes was visible. Callum knew they'd reach the village soon enough, much to his dismay.

As though in response to his apprehension, two pactrids appeared over a hill's crest, walking on the road in the opposite direction. Engaged in hushed conversation punctuated by laughter, they didn't notice Callum cowed near Rym's legs until they were nearly upon them. The conversation halted abruptly, and both faltered a moment—frightened by the sight of him. Rym gave them a silent nod in greeting, which they returned in kind before shifting their gaze back to Callum—now in curiosity—until they passed by. Callum risked glancing over his shoulder to find the two doing the same.

The first stars made their appearance when the village of Tadrie came into view. Callum didn't know what to expect, but this place appeared much busier than he anticipated. More expansive as well. He felt like a child looking up at the towering wooden buildings—a mix of homes and storefronts. From a pactrid's point of view, these were normal, but for Callum their looming size was oppressive.

Pactrids of all kinds, none in any rush, ambled about. This was the first time he'd ever seen a female pactrid. They were wide and sturdy like any male, but with a slightly pinkish hue colouring their grey skin, and, more obviously, breasts. Echoing the previous encounter on the road, none noticed Callum until they passed close by. Reactions were varied. Inquisitive peeks; dark scowls; indignant glances; whispered words between small groups. Surely having a human pass through their village was a novelty, but for Callum, this was humiliating. Red-faced, he hung his head down to avoid their stares. Others looked to Rym with fascination and astonishment, and soon a growing crowd followed in their wake. Judging by Rym's uneasy demeanour, he wasn't comfortable with the attention, either.

"Over here," he muttered only loud enough for Callum to hear, and led him toward a building surrounded by a covered porch. Tables and chairs, colossal in scale, were placed in groups, with a few pactrids sitting and drinking from wooden tankards. While Callum could speak the pactrid language, it had been taught to him orally. Their alphabet was foreign to him, and the sign hung above the building's entrance was illegible.

The step up onto the porch was low by pactrid standards, but still required Callum to lift his leg quite high to climb it. Opening the door brought the aroma of savoury cooking, acting as a stark reminder—Callum was starving. The obstructed view from behind Rym's legs was enough to deduce this was a tavern. Presumably Rym was hungry as well, so coming here made sense. At first, patrons paid them no mind, but when a few from the outdoor group entered warily, all eyes fell to Callum, and silence filled the room.

Rym ignored this and continued toward the bar. Not wanting to make any eye contact, Callum kept his gaze down—timidly brushing against Rym's leg and keeping the rope taut between them.

"Welcome, traveller," the barkeep said. "I trust you won't be bringing trouble to my establishment?"

"The only trouble will be from your guests if they should harass me or my charge."

The barkeep's gaze fell to Callum. "An interesting find. What do you intend to do with the human?"

Rym opened his satchel and revealed a copper token. Something was engraved into it, but from Callum's vantage, he couldn't discern any detail. "That's nobody's business but my own."

Upon seeing the token, the barkeep's demeanour shifted from uncertainty to respect. "Understood. What can I do for you?"

"Food and a room for the night."

"Supper is not a problem, but I'm hesitant to have a human sleeping under my roof."

A few grumbles of agreement reminded Rym of the uninhibited eavesdroppers crowded behind him. He turned, holding up the token for all to see. "You can return to your food and drink, friends. I would appreciate some privacy between the proprietor and myself."

Whatever the token meant did the job. Within moments, the tavern was filled with conversation again, although Callum had no doubt he was the topic on everyone's lips. Rym turned back to the barkeep, pulling a leather pouch from his satchel.

"I've been travelling for many days, and would greatly appreciate a bed this night. I can vouch that I will keep the human bound and within my reach at all times. I can pay extra—"

The barkeep gave Rym a friendly pat on the hand. "That won't be necessary. Your word is good enough for me." A price was

agreed upon, and then a key was given to Rym. “I’ll bring your supper to your room. The sooner you can hide that human, the better.”

Rym nodded. “Please ask the cook for extra on the plate. It’s been a while since I’ve eaten a proper meal, and I’ll be sharing with the human.”

“Of course. You’ll find your room upstairs. Number four.” The barkeep reached under the counter to pull out a candle in a simple holder. He lit it from a nearby flame and handed it over.

Rym led Callum toward the stairs, passing through a tight throng of seated patrons. They were probably labourers enjoying a drink after a hard day’s work. But all these large, rowdy pactrids caused Callum to shy away. Nothing was stopping them from seizing him with their grubby hands. Given their size and strength, there was no chance he’d be able to fight back, either. His only protection was Rym and the respect given due to that peculiar copper token. As though sensing Callum’s unease, Rym placed a hand upon his shoulder and escorted him through the crowd toward the towering staircase.

Callum couldn’t help but scoff at the obstacle ahead of him. Unlike the porch, the stairs were imposingly tall, forcing him to climb each step. Rym patiently followed behind, but wore a coy smile while he watched Callum struggle.

Opening the door to their room exposed a dark expanse. Neither the last remnants of fading daylight from the window nor the candle in Rym’s hand helped to reveal the interior. Once inside and the door locked with his key, Rym lit two candles held in sconces and an oil lamp on a table—just enough to unveil basic yet functional quarters for sleeping. That everything was oversized from Callum’s perspective was still jarring, though. The bed, as well as the table and two chairs, came up to his chest. Hired rooms back in Anbera were usually too small, yet the high ceiling and vast width of this room was anything but.

Rym hung his satchel from one chair, unravelled the dirty fabric wraps from his stumpy feet, and lay down on the bed with a deep, tired sigh. Unsure what to do, Callum unshouldered his rucksack and placed it against the wall near the table. His leash was still tied around his waist, the other end left forgotten on the floor. Given the only way out was through a locked door—*and the window, I suppose, but that’s a far jump down*—Callum felt the rope

was entirely unneeded. He coughed gently to catch Rym's attention.

The pactrid's head rose to look at him.

"Could you untie me, please?"

Rym swung his legs over and planted his feet on the floor while sitting on the bed. "Of course, pup. Come here."

Once again, his tone while calling him 'pup' didn't have the demeaning edge as before. Now, it felt almost endearing, familiar. Rym gestured for Callum to stand between his legs and turn around. Being so close to the pactrid, Callum caught a whiff of him—an exotic, heady musk he found disturbingly pleasant.

With a few tugs, the rope loosened, and multiple loops around his waist fell to the ground. It was only then he realised how tight his bonds had been, and to be free of the pressure was a relief.

Powerful hands suddenly slipped under his arms, lifting Callum into the air. Unsure what Rym was doing, Callum grunted and twisted away—feeling like an unwieldy child being lifted by an adult—but the pactrid's grip remained firm. The ride was brief, however, and Rym plopped Callum onto the edge of the bed beside him.

"I figured it would be easier to lift you up," Rym said.

"I can sleep on the floor."

Rym let out a huff. "You may be my prisoner, but that doesn't mean I wish you any more discomfort than necessary. We can share the bed. You wouldn't take up any space."

With his new vantage point, Callum regarded the bed—a seemingly endless expanse covered by inviting, soft linen. The pallet was overly firm, but given the weight of a pactrid, that was inevitable. Still, the idea of sleeping in the same bed as his captor—*my enemy*—felt terribly inappropriate.

"Maybe," Callum mumbled and jumped down.

Rym lay back again. "Suit yourself."

Callum busied himself by gathering the thick rope and placing it beside his rucksack. He eyed his two escape points, the door and the window. If he had the key—currently in Rym's pocket—he felt confident he'd be able to reach up, unlock it, and pull the latch. How noisy would that be, though? Was Rym a deep sleeper? Even if Callum managed to escape the room, sneaking out of the tavern unseen felt improbable. Maybe the common room wasn't open all night. But if it was, what would a bunch of drunken pactrids do to him?

The window was the other possibility. He'd have to move the chair and climb it to reach the window's ledge. Fastening the rope to a table leg could allow him to climb down. Would the table be heavy enough to take his weight without shifting? It certainly appeared sturdily built.

Relaxed, heavy breathing came from the bed.

"Rym?" Callum said lightly.

Is he asleep? Callum grit his teeth. This was his first chance to escape, but he was too nervous to mess things up and anger his captor. It really felt like Rym was trusting him, and if Callum was caught breaking that trust, who knew how he'd react. *Patience. You'll have all night. Now isn't the right time to run.*

As though to prove his point, a solid knock at the door had him jump. Rym snorted awake and rose, eyeing Callum with a touch of wariness to find him standing there. Surely Callum looked suspicious—he couldn't help feeling it. Pulling the key from his pocket, Rym unlocked the door. Callum risked a peek around Rym's bulk to spy a pactrid holding a tray. Their eyes met for a moment, and Callum ducked out of view. Rym brought the tray to the table, fished into his satchel to pull out a coin, and handed it to the tender with his thanks. With the door locked again, Rym motioned for Callum to join him at the table.

"You must be hungry," he said. "I know I am."

Callum used the opportunity to lift his chair—*maybe I can lift it silently to the window and climb out*—but it was too heavy. Instead, he nudged it closer to the table, producing a resonant scrape of wood against wood. He shook his head in disappointment. How would he manage to get it to the window unnoticed? Climbing the chair and sitting down, only his head peeked over the top of the table. He felt like a child again.

Rym gave him a curious grin. "I think you'll have to stand to reach your food."

On the tray was a plate—nearly a metre wide—holding slabs of meat topped with gravy and cooked vegetables on the side. Another smaller plate held a loaf of bread, and beside that was a stout wooden tankard. Rym moved the loaf aside and portioned out some meat and vegetables onto the smaller plate, then pushed it toward Callum. There were two sets of cutlery provided, however there was no way Callum could use them to eat. They were too big.

"You'll have to eat with your hands," Rym said. "I'm sorry."

His apology for such a minor thing caught Callum unaware again. Why did he care about Callum's welfare? It was a stark contrast to how pactrid prisoners of war were treated.

A residual memory took him by surprise—broken bones; blood oozing into a floor grate; the stifled cries of the captive pactrid trying his best to fight against the pain. That prisoner held out until the bitter end—holding resolutely brave and proud while Elias Thake did his worst.

Callum didn't last a day as an interpreter. Going in, he knew there would be torture, but nothing could have prepared him for what he witnessed. It took many tendays for the images and screams in his mind to fade to the shadows, but they never left him completely. They lurked, biding their time to reemerge when he least expected. Anything could trigger their return—today, it was a pactrid apologising to him.

"You're shaking," Rym said.

Callum blinked away a tear threatening to pearl, glancing down to hide his face. "I guess—" He cleared his throat. "I guess I'm just hungry."

Rym gestured to the plate of food in front of Callum. "Is this not agreeable?"

"Yes, it looks good." Callum tore a chunk of meat and ate it. Savoury, juicy, delicious. He took another bite. "Thank you, Rym."

The pactrid nodded while enjoying his supper, and they continued to eat in silence. For a fleeting moment, Callum didn't feel like a prisoner. Rym was only a travel companion. How he wished that were true. But that brief period of respite was too easily crushed by the reality of his situation. If he couldn't escape, it was possible tomorrow would be his last day. Would they torture him for information he couldn't give? Even if they believed him, why would they set him free? Would he ever see home again? His mother? His only friend, Oren? He hoped his death would be quick, but knowing how Anberans treated pactrid prisoners, did he deserve a merciful end?

While Rym was mopping up juices with bread from his empty plate, Callum's food had barely been touched. Callum knew he should eat, but his appetite was gone. He forced a chunk of vegetable into his mouth and chewed, but getting it down wasn't easy. His mouth was dry. Rym saw something was wrong, and watched Callum with intent, silently giving him permission to speak

his mind.

"I wish we weren't enemies," Callum blurted out.

"That we are enemies is not my fault. It's yours. You humans brought this upon yourselves." An undercurrent of frustration tinged his baritone voice.

"I didn't have a choice in being part of this, though."

"There is always a choice, Cal'oom."

"Is being gaoled as a traitor a choice?"

Rym didn't skip a beat. "Yes. Better to be a traitor than take part in the wrong side of the war."

"How can you say that? We're just trying to take back our land __"

"How many times must I tell you?" Rym slammed a fist on the table, causing the cutlery to rattle. "It's o*ur* land!"

Callum, still standing on the chair, stumbled in fright and fell against the backrest. "That's not true. It can't be true," he replied, as much to himself as to Rym.

The pactrid grunted in indignation. "Ignorance is no excuse."

"But I haven't done anything. I've never attacked a pactrid."

"That may be so, but our blood is still on your hands."

Tortured screams from the past deafened Callum's ears, but he pushed it away as he stood up. "How?"

"You heal wounded soldiers so they can fight us again, *medic* Cal'oom. You are just as culpable as those who bear arms."

"Hardly. Those who make it back alive rarely return to the front lines."

Rym stared him down through narrowed eyes. "Good."

Roughly grabbing the tankard—causing its contents to spill—he stood and left the room. The lock clicked.

This is my only chance.

Callum leapt down and pushed the chair toward the window. It made a racket, but he didn't care at this point. After flipping the sturdy latch, the window opened inward, and Callum climbed onto the sill. Despite being past sunset, the street below was still teeming with pactrids. To make matters worse, a lamp hung on the wall right below where he wanted to rappel down, making a stealthy escape impossible.

Callum swore out loud, incredulous at his ill fortune. Not wanting to get in more trouble, he latched the window shut and moved the chair back. Perhaps he'd get another chance to escape

tomorrow. He felt for the sharp rock in his pocket—it was still there. Anger took hold now, pushing away the raw grief tormenting him earlier. His hunger had returned, and he climbed the chair to devour the cold meal before him.

By the time he was done, the lock clicked again, announcing Rym's return. The pactrid entered, secured the door, then sat on the edge of the bed with a sigh. Callum dared to glance over, finding Rym's temper had abated.

"I'm sorry."

As the words left Callum's mouth, he was surprised to find them genuine. This time, he wasn't trying to smooth things out to get his way. Rym's silver eyes shimmered in the low light, silently observing him in deliberation. Callum found it hard to hold his gaze, but refused to look away. It wasn't a challenge, but a way to show his sincerity. Part of him still wanted to escape, but the other half wanted to know more. Could it be true Anberans were the aggressors? To fool an entire nation into believing otherwise seemed impossible, but that's what Rym was suggesting.

Rym drank from his tankard. Judging by how far he'd tipped it back, it was near empty. "What I said earlier—that you were culpable—was a harsh statement. I shouldn't criticise you for wanting to mend the wounds of your injured comrades."

"But you still think being a traitor is the right choice? You say humans are on the wrong side of the war."

Rym sighed again. "As I said, I spoke harshly. You sit amongst the lower ranks. You don't make the big decisions. You aren't told the truth—"

"Who makes you the arbiter of truth?"

"I've seen it with my own eyes. Can you say the same?"

Callum, tight-lipped, stared at the floor in reply.

"Do you wish to see the truth?" Rym asked.

"What do you mean?"

The pactrid set his tankard on the bedside table, then sat cross-legged on the bed, patting the area in front of him as an invitation. Reluctantly, Callum made his way down the chair and then clambered onto the bed.

"Sit," Rym said.

Callum did so, matching the pactrid's cross-legged position, his knees nearly touching Rym's legs. Calmly, as not to frighten him, Rym placed his hands atop Callum's head.

“Hold on. I don’t want to be put to sleep.”

“Relax, pup. This will be different. Close your eyes and I will show you the truth.”

Callum stared into those silver eyes and saw no trace of deceit. He obeyed, then felt Rym’s warm hands caress his head. Waves of colour flashed across his vision. He flinched away from the touch and Rym immediately pulled away.

“What was that?” Callum demanded.

“I’m trying to show you. Trust me, no harm will come to you. They’re only images from my mind.”

“What?” Callum stammered, wondering if his understanding of the pactrid language had another hole.

With slight impatience, Rym lay his hands upon Callum again. “This is how we *gutach*. Don’t be afraid. Close your eyes.”

With a nervous breath, Callum did so, and once again streams of colour filled his vision. This time, he let himself submerge into it. The colours dulled and coalesced into pools of light at the top and darkness at the bottom. Gradually, details emerged, and he strained to focus. Dark pillars formed against the light beyond. Suddenly, everything came into focus.

It was night. The pillars were tree trunks. He was standing at the edge of a forest, albeit from a higher vantage point. Peering down, he found his body not as a human, but a pactrid. The moon —a giant sentinel overlooking all—illuminated the landscape with its blue light. Beyond lay a sea of ravaged tree trunks, their wood harvested. It resembled so many front lines he’d seen. After all, that’s where the war was always fought—between the clear-cut lands and the forest’s edge.

“Rym?”

“I’m here.” The pactrid’s rich voice sounded strange—reverberant in a way that didn’t match the environment—but then Callum realised they were still in the room, sitting on the bed. Rym’s warm hands on his head were still felt, but only faintly.

“This is really weird,” Callum said. “What am I seeing? Where are we?”

“Ten cycles ago, I was tasked to scout beyond enemy lines. I’m showing you the memory of my journey.”

Callum’s vision shifted, and he now stood just beyond the trees.

“We had found a hole between two garrisons, allowing passage

beyond the battlefields," Rym said. "I was directed to locate your caravan routes for future sabotage. I never found any, which was puzzling at the time. But now that I understand humans travel in a special way, it makes sense."

Once again, Callum feared telling Rym about the transporters had been a terrible idea. Suddenly, he was moving across the landscape at a rapid speed. His stomach lurched. It felt like he should be falling over, but his vision remained upright. Distant lamplight to the left and right divulged the garrison camps Rym alluded to, but they were soon behind him.

The sun rose from the east and set in the west within the span of two breaths, while the moon drifted steadily across the sky on its own southern trajectory. Uncountable numbers of tree trunks littered the rolling hills as he travelled north. The ground was littered with dead leaves and underbrush where the forest used to be, but that soon gave way to long grass. The trunks were rotten with age, crumbling.

Knowing what forests looked like now, he couldn't help but stare at the absolute devastation of the landscape. Not one tree was left intact. He knew their harvests were efficient, but never at such a scale. While not directly responsible, he felt shame nonetheless.

Time accelerated more so—the sun rising and falling at blinding speeds. The barren landscape a blur as he continued north. Then something burgeoned from the earth. Towering mountains, with crowns dusted with snow. The flat land transformed to rolling foothills below the looming peaks. Upon reaching a natural pass up the mountainside, everything stopped. The mountain range stretched from east to west beyond the horizon.

"This is the Spine," Rym announced. "This is the border between pactrid and human lands. As you saw, those garrisons were sitting on our land—our destroyed land." The resentment in Rym's voice was clear.

"I never knew these mountains were here—that this is our border."

"You were never told where your land ends. Perhaps your kind has forgotten over the generations."

Callum couldn't believe that. "You said you were alive before the war started. Were we enemies before that?"

"Enemies? No. But we weren't friends, either. We kept to our own side of the Spine."

“But then we crossed over.”

“Yes. We sent emissaries, demanding you humans leave our trees intact, but you didn’t listen. Instead, you killed them. Then you fortified your treecutters with troops, ultimately declaring war on our kind.”

Callum’s vision wavered and softened, and then fell black. He opened his eyes to find himself sitting on the bed in front of Rym again. The pactrid extended a thick finger and gently touched Callum’s wet cheek, just below his eye.

Had I been crying?

Rym’s gaze intensified, those silver eyes glittering, studying Callum with great intent. Trying to decipher the human before him.

“Now you’ve seen the truth, Cal’oom. What will you do with it?”

THREE

Death and Redemption

Despite Callum's uneasiness of lying in the same bed as his captor, Rym insisted, saying Callum would sleep better than on the floor. Given the hard pallet, Callum had his doubts, however over time he found the dense bed give way, allowing him to sink in. It was comfortable, but he couldn't sleep. Rym's pressing question rattled within Callum's skull all night.

What can I do with this information? The simple answer was to tell anyone and everyone, but especially Callum's superiors. Was it truly possible nobody knew? A century felt too short a time to lose such important facts, but given no one travelled the expanse Rym had shown him, perhaps it was possible.

Much to Callum's dismay, Rym tied the rope around his waist again as they prepared to leave the next morning. Departing the village of Tadrie, they headed northeast as the sun crested the horizon. The moon sat low in the northern sky, announcing the beginning of its ponderous tenday voyage. The Roaming Sea would follow, as it always did. Moonrises always reminded him of his father.

Callum put a hand to his chest, feeling the compass against his

skin. Suddenly overwhelmed by the need to wield it, he did so, balancing it on his open palm. The compass needle, however, didn't point to the correct position. Aligned with the moon, it should've pointed southwest. Instead, it swayed slightly northwest. Was it broken?

Rym glanced over, curious at the bauble in Callum's hand. "What is that?"

Callum tucked it back beneath his shirt. "I don't know the pactrid word for it. It was a gift from my father."

"I saw it while searching your unconscious body—after our . . . unfortunate scuffle. I didn't know what it was, but didn't look like a weapon."

"I appreciate you not taking it," Callum said. "It means a lot to me."

"What does it do?"

"It can show the way home."

"How?"

Callum's face flushed. "Admittedly, I don't know how it works."

Rym let out a suspicious grunt. "What do you call it?"

"It's a *compass*."

"Com-pass?"

Callum nodded absentmindedly, thinking about the needle pointing in the wrong direction again. Maybe the fall through the trees had damaged it.

Gathering clouds loomed as the day progressed, bringing a growing rot within Callum's gut. The pactrid stated they would reach a garrison outpost that afternoon. There, a *gotachi* would read his intent—whatever that entailed.

"Do pactrids torture prisoners?" Callum muttered, unsure he wanted to know the answer.

Rym peered at him sullenly. "Why do you ask?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? You're taking me in for questioning."

"What you've told me about yourself. Is it true?"

"Yes!"

"Then don't concern yourself."

Callum raised his hands in the air. "You didn't answer my question, though."

Rym turned his attention back to the road, taking a moment to reply. "No, I didn't."

“What happens if they don’t believe me?”

“That would mean you’re lying to yourself.”

“But it’s possible I’ve been told lies without knowing it. For me, it’s the truth.”

Rym puckered his lips as he considered Callum’s words. “I do not have an answer to that.”

Was it possible that the lie—prompting the war—had been repeated for so long that it became the truth? The rot in Callum’s belly deepened. What if a deep-seated belief sown within himself was lurking? A belief that he wanted all pactrids dead and gone. If he was absolutely honest with himself, a part of him *did* want that. Pactrids had killed so many people he loved and cared for. How could he not retain at least a modicum of animosity toward them?

Deep in thought, Callum trailed behind, requiring Rym to tug on the rope in order to keep pace. At least now, the tugs weren’t as forceful. They were more like gentle reminders. It was then Callum realised Rym’s contempt toward him had disappeared completely—so gradual, he hadn’t noticed it. The war was still a point of contention between them—as last night’s argument would attest—but that was inevitable.

“Our destination,” Rym announced, pointing to a settlement in the distance.

The outpost was enclosed in a sturdy palisade. Shouts drifted on the wind—it sounded like soldiers performing drills. To hear so many deep and thunderous pactrid voices hollering in unison, along with their trumpeting call, had Callum stumble. Rym turned back to find his captive nearly shaking in fear.

“What’s wrong, pup?” he asked, dropping to one knee and laying a hand on Callum’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Callum stammered. “Are you joking? You’re leading me to a place filled with pactrid troops. I’m going to be interrogated, and then what happens?”

Rym frowned in concern. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what comes after.”

Overwhelmed by despair, Callum hid his face with his hands. Part of him wished he hadn’t survived that fall. The hand on his shoulder delivered a light squeeze, but it did little to assuage his fears.

“I wish to offer you an apology,” Rym said.

“For what?” Callum asked, lowering his hands to peer up at

Rym.

"I treated you poorly when we met."

Callum couldn't help but chuckle nervously at the pactrid's choice of words. Rym had already apologised for the punch to the face. Why was he bringing it up again? "I appreciate that, but we didn't know each other. You only saw the enemy. And I ran from *you*, remember?"

Rym gave him a pained smile. "I know, but I hit you. I'm sorry."

To witness this looming pactrid full of remorse only added to the confusing pull of emotions coursing through Callum. Maybe it was his nerves, but more than anything, he wanted to hug Rym at that moment. Why did he feel this way?

"It's in the past. Let's leave it there."

While processing those words, the pactrid's steely gaze held Callum before giving a solemn nod in reply. He stood, examining the outpost in the distance. "Come on, pup. We've got to go."

Callum let out a long sigh and grunted in resignation. They approached the gates, flanked by two guards holding fearsome halberds. Rym fished the copper token from his satchel and passed it to one guard for inspection.

"I have a prisoner for questioning."

The two guards glared at Callum. He couldn't help cower near Rym, as he'd done in the past, but this angered the guard standing nearest. The brute grabbed Callum's arm, pulling him away from Rym, and then forcibly tugged his rucksack from his back.

"He's harmless," Rym said, positioning himself to Callum's defence, but then he abruptly halted his movement.

"We'll see about that," the other guard grumbled, handing back the copper token. "Where'd you find this *asafari*?"

"West of here."

The guard nodded in reply, then sidestepped into a nearby hut. From within, Callum heard a harsh jangle of chain, adding to the anxiety roiling in his belly. The guard reappeared with wrist and ankle shackles connected with sturdy chains. To know they had restraints meant for humans readily available unsettled Callum. *How often did they capture Anberans?*

At first, Rym watched stoically while Callum was fettered, but while the two guards were preoccupied, his eyes softened for Callum's benefit—a silent message of condolence, and to be brave.

Callum gave a near imperceptible nod in reply.

"Move!" the guard demanded in Callum's native language. Callum considered telling the guard he spoke their language, but instead decided it was more prudent to keep quiet and follow orders. He certainly didn't dare one last glance at Rym, though he felt a strange pang of regret in not saying goodbye.

The guard guided him—using grunts and impatient hand gestures—toward a wide, squat stone building. There was no door, just an open archway. Past the threshold, the air cooled dramatically, chilling the nervous sweat clinging to his body. The rough-hewn stone hallway, devoid of decoration, said that no love was put into the construction of the place. This became clear as they rounded a corner to reveal a large room containing five iron-barred cells. Slits were cut into the rock wall, allowing shafts of sunlight to illuminate the otherwise dark room. Callum was reminded of the interrogation room back home, but he hastily scrubbed it from his mind. Now was not the time to remember that.

The guard flung the rucksack into the opposite corner of the room. "Hands up!" His thick pactrid accent speaking Callum's native language was obvious now.

Restrained by the chains between his wrists and ankles, Callum raised his hands as best he could, and the guard proceeded in a rough pat-down. The pactrid felt the compass under Callum's shirt and tugged at the chain around his neck holding it.

"Please, be careful," Callum said, pulling it free and handing it to the guard before he could damage it.

The pactrid stood momentarily bemused to hear Callum speak his language, but then continued his search. He felt something in Callum's pocket and pointed for him to remove it. Callum handed over the rock, which the guard inspected. Not finding anything of interest, he tossed it aside and finished with Callum's legs and feet —finding nothing more.

Metal screeched as the gate to a cell was opened, and Callum entered without any need of instruction. The door slammed shut, then locked using a key hanging on the wall opposite the cells—freedom taunting him. The guard left without another word, leaving Callum alone in the cold room. Aside from an unwashed chamber pot in one corner and straw on the floor, the cell was empty.

"What's your story, friend?"

Callum glanced nervously at the low, raspy voice coming from

another cell. Clearly Anberan, judging by the timbre and the fact he spoke his language. When Callum didn't immediately reply, the man rose from the floor two cells away. He wore what appeared to be a burlap sack with holes for his head and arms, and shackled the same as Callum.

"You okay, kid?"

Callum blinked. "Uh, yeah."

"What's your name?"

"Hidaro. Medic. You?"

"I'm Hindle. Infantry. 174th Company."

Callum grasped the metal bars of his cell. "I'm 174th, too. Got here by transport accident."

Hindle grunted. "You and me must've been in the same circle. You come across anyone else?"

"No. You?"

Hindle shook his head. "If they're lucky, they're dead."

"How long you been here?"

"A day. Was captured not far from here. I think we're close to the front lines, though. Came across a number of 'trid military outposts. Got caught by patrol in the middle of the night, just trying to get some water from a well."

Callum gave Hindle the short version of his story, but left out his interactions with Rym.

"Hunker down," Hindle said. "No idea what they have planned for us, but they seem in no rush."

"Some pactrid is supposed to question us."

Hindle eyed him with suspicion. "How you know that?"

"I can speak their language."

"Thought you said you were a medic. How'd you learn 'trid?"

"I am, but I also trained as an interpreter for inquisitors, but . . . that didn't work out."

Hindle grunted in reply, smart enough to realise it wasn't a topic Callum wanted to discuss. The man sunk back into his straw nest, giving Callum the idea to do the same. He gathered the straw into a pile and lay down, shuffling to make himself as comfortable as possible.

Gashes of sunlight crept gently across the room, lengthening and fading away as the sun set. His cellmate remained silent, which was fine. There was nothing to discuss, and neither felt the need to bemoan their hardship in being captured.

Firelight coming from the hallway—harsh shadows accentuating the rough chiselled stone—caught his attention. A warder carrying a lantern and a tray entered the cell room. After hanging the light from a hook on the ceiling, he passed half a loaf of bread to each prisoner, as well as battered tin cups of water. To Callum's surprise, the warder left without comment or disdain toward them. Both the bread loaf and tin cup were large—meant for pactrids. At least neither Callum nor Hindle would be left wanting. And while the bread was dry, probably a day old, it was still completely edible. Callum pondered if they treated their pactrid prisoners as fairly. *I doubt it.*

Exhaustion took hold, and sleep came easy. Callum woke to grey morning light barely reaching into the dark room. His first thought was of Rym—where he was, what he might be doing now that he'd delivered Callum. He shook his head in confusion. *Why should I care?* The answer to that question was obvious, but he hated to admit it. Rym fascinated him, but it was difficult to ascertain why. Little things, such as the manner in which he spoke or how he regarded him if Callum said something that intrigued him. He supposed that was part of it. Rym made Callum feel seen in a way he'd never experienced before.

Heavy footfalls echoed from the hallway, accompanied by lamplight—breaking his thoughts. Two pactrid guards entered. One grabbed the keys hanging on the wall and approached Hindle's cell. Once the door was unlocked and swung open, the two guards stared down at Hindle expectantly. The soldier was awake—still resting in his straw nest—but he didn't know what they wanted.

"Up!" one guard commanded.

Uneasily, Hindle obeyed, the chains of his shackles ringing loudly. "Where we going?"

Whether or not the pactrids understood his question, they didn't reply. As soon as Hindle was standing, they grabbed his arms and pulled him out of his cage. Callum stood at his own cell door, watching as they replaced the keys and marched him out of the room.

"Good luck," he muttered.

Hindle tried to put on a brave face, but in the shadows created by the stark light, his fear broke through the façade. Their footsteps faded, followed by a heavy door opening and closing. Callum could only assume Hindle was with the *gotachi* Rym spoke of. Flashes of

Elias Thake's implements of torture flashed in his mind. He hoped the door was thick enough not to hear Hindle's screams. Maybe the soldier was smart enough to give them what they wanted, but would that be enough? What if he couldn't give them the answers they demanded? This continued to be Callum's worry. Nothing he knew was of strategic value. Would they believe him?

More approaching footsteps. Callum rushed back to the rear of his cell and dug into his own straw nest. It was ridiculous, but it gave him a modest hint of security, and he'd take anything he could get. A solitary guard entered with a lantern in one hand and a wooden container in the other. He replaced the hanging lantern that had burnt through its fuel the night before, then opened Callum's cell, motioning to step out. Callum heeded the command with apprehension. The guard knelt down and unfastened the shackles around his wrists and ankles, placing them on a table opposite the cells.

"Strip," the guard demanded.

Callum baulked at the request, but the pactrid's impatient glare told him he'd ought to follow the command. With each article of his uniform removed, the guard tore it from Callum's grasp and tossed it beside the shackles. Callum stood in his underlinen breeches, shivering in the chilly morning air.

"Strip!" the guard repeated, pointing at the only thing protecting his modesty.

Callum had been naked amidst men before and it was never an issue. Life in the military meant privacy was nonexistent, and he'd grown used to it quickly enough. But here, in this situation, he felt on display—even if there was only one observer. Maybe that had something to do with it, or maybe it was because he had no idea why this pactrid wanted him naked.

It didn't matter. Given the circumstances, he knew he had no choice but to comply with the order. The guard took Callum's breeches, added it to the pile, and then pointed toward the far wall. In the dim light, Callum caught a glint of chains and shackles hanging there. The guard pushed him toward the wall, then locked his wrists to the chains, which at least had enough slack that his arms weren't forced up.

"Please," Callum begged in the pactrid's language, "don't hurt me."

The guard, taken aback to hear a human speaking his

language, scoffed at his plea. “It’s not me you need to worry about, human. You stink. You’ll offend the *gotachi*.”

The pactrid left the room, only to return moments later carrying two buckets of water, although the size of these buckets could’ve been compared to wine casks cut in half. Without warning, the guard tossed the contents of one bucket at him. Callum gasped as the ice-cold water soaked him completely. While he recovered from the shock, the pactrid drew near with a cake of soap, lathering it into a large scrubbing brush he’d retrieved from the container. The rough bristles scratched at his skin as the guard scrubbed him clean. He made quick work of it, but didn’t leave any crevice untouched. When Callum could take it no more, the pactrid relented and lifted the second bucket. This time, he poured methodically over Callum’s head, allowing the frigid water to wash the soap away.

The guard retrieved a towel from the container and tossed it at Callum. “All better?” His voice held a mocking tone, as though Callum’s fear of him was unjustified.

Shivering from the cold, Callum used the rough yet absorbent towel to dry himself. The guard watched passively while he waited for Callum to finish, then unbound his wrists from the shackles.

“Put this on,” he said, handing Callum a burlap sack akin to what Hindle wore.

While Callum donned the simple garment, he listened for any sign of Hindle—talking, yelling, screaming. *Nothing. Maybe the door is thick enough to block sound.*

The guard led him back to his cell, then bound him into his wrist and ankle shackles again. Once Callum was locked in his cell, the pactrid gathered his items, grabbed the lantern from the ceiling hook, and left.

Callum slumped into his nest. His skin burned. While it felt good to remove the grime from three days of travel, that was by far the worst bathing experience he’d ever endured. He longed for the hot, perfumed water of the bathhouse near his home, and a hearty meal at the inn he often frequented. But the idea of making it home seemed a far-flung dream now. Would he even be alive by day’s end?

He burrowed deeper into the straw, pulling the burlap sack closer against his skin in an attempt to warm himself. The recollection of Rym’s warm hand teased him. He grasped at the

memory, replaying it in his mind, imagining the pactrid was still by his side.

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Sudden hollering caused Callum to jerk awake. He'd unknowingly drifted off. Another yell—undeniably Hindle—had Callum spring up to the front of his cell, trying to catch a glimpse down the hallway. The soldier's words were muffled, followed by grunts and sounds of struggling. But instead of returning Hindle to his cell, the sound of his voice grew more distant. The guards were leading him outside. *Where are they going?* Despite being muffled—perhaps he was gagged—the soldier's voice bounced off the palisade walls. Suddenly, the anger in his voice shifted to frightened pleading. The hair on the back of Callum's neck rose, and he backpedalled to his straw nest. He didn't want to hear any of this, nor imagine what was happening out there. The muffled screams rose in urgency, evolving to cries of despair, and then everything fell silent.

Absolute petrifying silence.

No pactrid voices in the distance, no drills, nothing. It was as though the outpost had been vacated. Callum took a ragged breath in, realising he'd been holding it all this time. He cupped a hand to his ear, trying to detect any sign of life. Finally, he heard a pactrid voice. He couldn't comprehend the words, but the timbre was low, sombre. Another pactrid replied in similar fashion. There was no doubt Hindle was dead now. At least his death was swift, but that did nothing to ease Callum's rising dread.

Footsteps approached from the hallway. *Is this really how it ends?* A guard entered and unlocked his cell.

"Come," he ordered.

Callum followed the pactrid solemnly. The stone floor was cold on his bare feet while he was marshalled to the open entrance. However, instead of being led outside, they continued along the corridor to the opposite wing of the building. This was where Hindle had been brought. The guard opened a wooden door to reveal a spartanly furnished room. A table and two chairs. One chair large enough to seat a pactrid. The other had long legs, allowing a human to sit at eye level with an interrogator. Sconces

on each wall did their best to light the room, but the craggy stone walls left an air of uninviting starkness.

The chair meant for humans had a ladder built into the legs, allowing him to climb up to the seat. But there were no manacles. No fearsome tools of torture on the table. No blood on the floor. Once Callum had seated, the guard closed the door and stood blank-faced, staring at the empty wall opposite, waiting at attention. Callum remained still, eyes down, his mind reeling at what was to come next. This was torture in its own right.

Once an excruciating number of minutes had passed, a knock came at the door. The guard opened it, allowing a female pactrid wearing a flowing white robe to enter the room. She took a seat opposite Callum, then nodded to the guard, who took his leave and closed the door.

Callum nervously glanced up, eyeing her vast adornment of earrings, necklaces, and gaudy rings. Her expression was one of profound scrutiny, and she caught his gaze, refusing to let go. Callum's breath quickened at the sudden loss of control, losing himself in her eyes. After a moment, her stare abated, allowing Callum to blink.

"What is your name?" she asked in his language with hardly a shade of a pactrid accent.

Now it was his turn to be taken aback, gaining a better understanding of what pactrids experienced when he spoke their language. "My name is Callum."

"Hello, Callum. I am Neva."

He offered a deferential nod in greeting. "Are you a *gotachi*?"

Neva regarded him with a raised brow. "Where did you hear this word?"

"Rym— uh, the scout who brought me here. He told me a *gotachi* would judge me."

"He told you?"

"I can speak your language," Callum replied in her native tongue.

She sat back in her seat, astonishment written on her face. "Indeed you can," she replied, keeping the conversation to his own language. "And yes, I am a *gotachi*."

Callum found himself battered by conflicting perceptions of what to expect next. All the fear of this moment that had boiled within him now felt irrational. But he was unwilling to let his guard

down.

"Shall we begin?" Neva asked, holding out her hands, palms up, across the table toward him.

"Will this hurt?"

"Simply lay your hands atop mine."

Tentatively, Callum reached out and placed his hands onto her open palms. They were soft and warm. Seeing his hands dwarfed in hers reinstated the size difference between them.

"Now, look into my eyes," she said softly.

Not wanting to lose control again, he was reticent to comply. But a gentle squeeze from Neva broke his resolve, and he met her gaze. As before, he found himself unable to blink or look away. His breathing halted, followed by continuous exhalation—more than his lungs could possibly hold. While he didn't feel the urge to breathe in again, it was an alarming sensation, and panic set in. His vision narrowed until only Neva's face was visible. Her own glazed-over eyes bore into him, through him, past him. Her body was here, but she was somewhere else. Callum tried to pull his hands away, but his muscles refused to obey. His mouth twitched, trying to form words, but he couldn't utter a sound. Distressingly, the endless supply of air from his lungs was diminishing, and the burning need to take in a breath awakened—growing with each passing second. He wanted to scream, but no matter what he tried, he remained locked in this state.

Then, with a sudden wallop, everything ended. He gasped for air, coughing. His dry eyes stung.

"I'm sorry, child," Neva said. "I didn't mean to take so long, but you had much to impart with me." She patiently gave Callum the time he needed to recover from the ordeal.

"I don't understand," he muttered, wiping his eyes.

"You need not understand. All that matters is what you've shared. You are a rare human, Callum."

He coughed again. "Is that . . . a good thing?"

Neva smiled. "Of course, child. It means you are no longer our captive. You are free."

Callum couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What about Hindle? The other human?"

She shook her head, eyes downcast. "I'm sorry, Callum. He wasn't like you."

"But, what did you do to him?"

“Our law states any human who wishes us harm must be executed.”

Callum assumed as much, but he couldn’t help the anger from welling up. “How could one human be so frightening that you need to execute them?”

Her lips narrowed, not appreciating his harsh tone. “One human is of no concern, but in great numbers, the power humans can wield is something to fear. Do not think we enjoy ending life—even if they are our enemy—but needs must. We give each prisoner a chance to prove themselves, just as you have. Your fellow comrade failed that test.”

She rose from her seat and opened the door. The guard jumped to attention, and she muttered something to him. Whatever she said caused him to stare at Callum, his face in shock. She spoke another word, again too faintly for Callum to hear, and the guard entered the room.

“Down,” he said in his thick pactrid accent.

Callum descended the side of the chair, and the guard crouched before him to unlock the shackles around his wrists and ankles. Gathering the chains into his hands, the guard looked upon Callum with disbelief, followed by a hesitant yet commendable nod.

Callum returned it in kind. “Thank you,” he said in the pactrid’s language.

This brought a hint of a smile. “Wait here. I will retrieve your belongings.”

The guard left the room, leaving Callum alone with Neva, who still stood at the doorway’s threshold.

“What happens now?” he asked.

“That is your choice to make.”

“So I can return home?”

Neva was taken aback by the question, but then washed it away with a smile. “If that is what you desire, yes.”

“You’re aware I’ll be returned to the front lines, aren’t you?”

“Yes. We were informed you’re a medic.”

“I won’t be fighting your kind directly, but . . .” He was reminded of Rym’s words. *Better to be a traitor than take part in the wrong side of the war.*

“You were forced into this conflict, child. Your heart has shown me the anger and strife residing within you. Grown in an environment of such hatred, this is understandable, yet that still

doesn't cloud your true beliefs."

"What are my beliefs?" Callum felt a fool to ask, but was unsure of the answer.

Neva smiled. "That everyone, humans and pactrids alike, deserve a voice—a chance to be heard, to be understood. You believe conflict can be overcome if we simply listen to each other."

Is that what I believe? Callum couldn't help blush at the naïvety of such a creed. "If only life was that simple."

"Yes. Such a lofty goal is idealistic and unlikely, but regardless, it speaks volumes to your character."

The guard returned with Callum's rucksack and his uniform gathered atop it.

"You can change here," Neva said. "I'll await you outside."

She and the guard left him alone to dress. By this point, he didn't think Neva was lying or trying to deceive him, but their decision to leave him unsupervised really showed they trusted him. He shimmied out of the burlap material and donned his uniform, happy to have his boots back on. The stone floors might be fine for pactrid feet, but they were much too cold for him. Worry set in when his compass was missing, but then he found it tucked into his jacket pocket. The guard must've placed it there—a thoughtful gesture.

After shouldering his rucksack, Callum poked his head into the hallway, finding it empty. Distant hollering echoed outside—more drills—accompanied by their distinctive trumpet calls. In spite of what he knew now, he believed those calls would always cause him to flinch. They had always meant death.

Stepping outside, Callum had to shield his eyes despite the grey sky. Gentle rain fell. Neva stood under the extended roof of the stone building and beckoned him to join her. Across the courtyard stood a gallows. He hadn't noticed it when he'd arrived, but its size told him this was a gallows only meant for Anberans. At least Hindle's body had been removed. He didn't have the stomach to see someone hanging there. Regardless, Callum couldn't help flinching from a stab of guilt.

"Why did Hindle have to die, and not me?" Callum asked. "It doesn't seem fair."

Neva looked down at Callum, then to the gallows he was staring at. "You may be young, but I know you're old enough to know life is never fair. Your fellow comrade's beliefs were ones of

animosity and want for genocide. We were given no choice."

Callum pondered how many others thought similarly. His father believed in the war, wanted to push back the pactrid threat, but did he hate them enough to want their race wiped out?

"Rym said the war started because humans invaded your land. But as far as we humans are concerned, we're trying to take back what's *ours*."

"The mountain to the north—the Spine—has always delineated our borders."

"I'm not sure anyone on my side knows about those mountains. It was news to me."

Neva stared at him with a critical eye. "Child, those in command must know this. They simply refuse to share that truth with you."

"You're saying countless people have died believing a lie? I can't accept that."

"Then you choose to live in ignorance." Her tone wasn't chiding, but hinted at sorrow.

"But I've only just learnt this information, from my *enemy* no less"—he made a point of showing no ill will to say the word—"and you expect me to believe such a fact without question?"

"Then find the truth yourself. And when you find it, share it far and wide with your fellow humans. But be wary, Callum. Those in power will not appreciate what you have to say. They may decide to silence you if you speak too loudly."

She was right. Saying the wrong thing, even in jest, could get someone in trouble. Did he have the conviction to risk it? Would it even make a difference if he tried?

"Pup?"

Rym's unique voice had Callum take in a surprised breath. He turned to find the pactrid standing nearby, bearing an elusive smile. Callum's heart ached at the sight of him, and it took all his power not to rush toward him. He questioned why he felt this way. Only days prior, he was trying to run away from the pactrid.

"You're still here?" Callum's voice cracked embarrassingly.

Rym approached him. "I felt sure you would pass the test. They told me you were set free."

"You have a keen sense, scout," Neva said.

"Thank you," he replied with a reverential nod. "But Cal'oom showed me this in his words and actions. Of course, I couldn't be

sure without your talents, *gotachi*." He turned his attention back to Callum—his silver eyes glittering—wearing that smile again. "I'm glad I wasn't wrong."

Callum fought against his emotions again. Part of him wanted to throw himself into Rym's arms and hug the massive pactrid, while another part told him he was crazy to want such a thing. Even if they'd come to an understanding, these pactrids were still his enemy, however much he wished it otherwise.

"Callum would like to return home," Neva said.

"Oh." Rym stood dumbfounded and surprised by the statement.

"Is . . . that alright?" Callum asked.

Rym's eyes darted about, unable to meet Callum's gaze. "If that's what you want . . ."

"Can you escort him back to the front lines?" she asked.

"Uh, yes. Of course," he replied with another nod, short and abrupt this time.

Neva turned back to Callum. "As *gotachi*, it pains me to tell you I've sent many human prisoners to their death. This task has never brought me joy, but it must be done to protect our kind. Being with a human as rare as yourself is a reason to celebrate."

Callum scratched the back of his head nervously. "I'm far from perfect."

"None of us are," Neva replied with a chuckle. "But believe me when I say, you are special."

Callum's cheeks warmed. "Well, thank you, I guess."

Neva pulled a token from her pocket, akin to what Rym had shown in the past, however this one was smaller and made of a silvery metal. She handed it to Callum.

"This is a pass to travel our lands with an escort. Understand that our kind will always be wary of humans. It is quite possible you will be accosted, but revealing this pass should temper any physical aggression toward you. But I cannot stress the importance that this pass cannot be lost or misplaced. Never let it leave your person. Ever."

Callum rubbed the surface of the token engraved with pactrid writing. Once again, he wished he could read their language. "I understand. Thank you for your trust."

"Save travels, child."

She departed, leaving an awkward moment of silence between

Callum and Rym. Callum examined the token a moment longer before slipping it into his pocket.

"Are you hungry?" Rym asked hesitantly.

Callum's nerves had been on edge all morning, and at the time, the thought of food nauseated him. Now, with the relief of making it out of this ordeal alive, the mention of food was welcoming, and he nodded.

"Come on, then. Let's get you fed."

Rym led him away from the stone building and down a lane packed flat from the stomping of innumerable pactrid feet. They entered another building filled with long tables and stools, evidently a mess hall. Being mid-morning, it was empty, which was fine by Callum. He wasn't sure how comfortable he'd be amid a full crowd of pactrid troopers. The smell of food wafted from the kitchens—cooks preparing for the noontide meal. Rym scrounged up some leftovers from breakfast. Thick oatmeal topped with berries. Once again, the lack of properly sized utensils meant Callum had to eat with his hands again. The food was plain, but did the job to fill his belly. While he ate, Rym sat next to him. It was obvious he wanted to say something, and Callum couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"I really appreciate that you waited for me."

Rym shrugged in reply, a shy smile crossing his lips.

"But I feel I've let you down somehow," Callum added. "And I guess I should ask why you stuck around in the first place?"

The forward question caught Rym off-guard. "It was a foolish reason." Despite the pactrid's hulking size, his nervousness made him vulnerable in an oddly adorable fashion.

Callum chuckled softly in an attempt to ease his tension. "Foolish or not, I'd like to know."

"I'd rather not," Rym replied, his voice a subtle rumble.

The open doorway leading outdoors darkened, catching Callum's attention. Two pactrid troopers, one standing behind the other, poked their heads in, staring at him. After a moment, they stepped inside. Having younger pactrids stand near Rym allowed Callum to compare their appearances. Rym had mentioned he was over a century in age, but to Callum's untrained eye, gave no impression he was ancient. Now, he noticed Rym's skin was a darker shade of grey, and rougher in appearance. Even the way he stood—slightly hunched over compared to the young soldiers—gave

a better impression Rym was indeed older. Regardless, he was far from feeble. Their multi-day journey didn't wear him out, and when they first met, he had no problem catching Callum and giving him a wallop.

"We heard the prisoner was released, and he can speak our language," the first trooper said to Rym. "We wanted to see for ourselves."

"Uh, yes. Hello," Callum said.

The pactrids bore toothy grins, stepping closer in curiosity. Callum felt like he was part of a spectacle. *Better this than being attacked, I guess.*

"How do you know our language?" the second pactrid asked.

Once again, Callum felt the need to sidestep the question since he didn't know how Anberans acquired knowledge of the pactrid language. "I was taught. A select number of humans can speak it." He turned to Rym. "How does the *gotachi* know how to speak *my* language?"

"Since they deal directly with all human prisoners, they must learn your language."

"Yes, but how? Who teaches them?"

He frowned as though Callum should've known this. "Refugee humans."

Callum blinked. "What refugees?"

The two soldiers scoffed at his confusion, and Rym raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Those who are against the war, who help us fight. Humans like you."

"What?!"

"You had no knowledge of this?"

"No, I thought I was the only one," Callum stammered, realising how arrogant that sounded as it left his mouth. Sure, he assumed others disagreed with the war, but would've never thought pactrids would take them in. The concept opposed everything he reckoned he knew.

Rym took his hand—giant fingers engulfing his—and led him outside, away from the two troopers who stood there with puzzled expressions on their faces.

"Where are you taking me?" Callum asked, pulling up his hood to shield himself from the rain.

Rym nudged him to the relative privacy of a narrow alleyway between two buildings, and then knelt down to look upon Callum at

his level. “I waited for you because I assumed you would stay.”

“Stay here?” Callum asked, gesturing at the outpost.

Rym shook his head and let out a long sigh, trying to summon the courage to say what was on his mind. “I know our short time together has been volatile, and we barely know each other, but . . . I feel a connection between us I can’t explain. A part of me risked the hope you felt the same way.”

While Rym spoke—subjecting himself to the possibility of rejection—Callum’s stomach somersaulted. Rym’s words couldn’t have better mirrored his own feelings. Although Callum still couldn’t decipher those emotions, he felt it was only fair to share them with Rym.

“I’ll admit being with you makes me feel good,” Callum managed to say. “But we’re enemies. It’s not right.”

“Human and pactrid might be at war, but that doesn’t mean you and I can’t be friends.”

The idea of being friends with a pactrid drew a bemused smile on Callum’s face. To have such a powerful ally at his side brought on such an intense feeling of security. But then the reality of what Rym was suggesting crashed down upon him.

“I’d really like that, but I don’t see how we could make it work. You want me to stay, but what you’re really asking me is to abandon everything and everyone I know.”

Staring at the ground between them, Rym nodded sullenly, rain dripping off his large ears. “I’m sorry. You’re correct. I let my emotions lead, and didn’t properly consider the implications.”

Callum’s heart sunk to witness him so forlorn, but he couldn’t even begin to conceive a plan to make it work. “I’m sorry, too. I wish we could go somewhere else—away from all this madness—where humans and pactrids could live in peace together.”

Those words connected with Rym. He stared at Callum with an intensity that should’ve been frightening, but Callum found it strangely captivating. That he could affect the pactrid in such a way felt like a privilege. The moment passed, and Rym’s eyes softened. “There are refugee villages to the south. They would accept you, and it would mean we could see each other.”

Callum couldn’t fault the pactrid’s determination, but the idea of uprooting his life frightened him more than he was willing to admit. “I’m sorry, Rym. I can’t.”

It was then Rym accepted there was no possibility he could

persuade him. Callum felt terrible, wishing he could forget his life—his past—and move on. But he couldn't. To know his mother would be told her only remaining son was killed brought an ache to his heart. He had to go back. Not just for her, but to tell people the truth of the war—that Anberans were the aggressors. It was presumptuous to assume he alone could make a difference, to change the trajectory of the war, or to possibly end it.

But to not even try? That was worse.

FOUR

Shattered Beliefs

The journey north to the front lines entailed two more days of travel. At first, being free of the rope leash felt wrong, but that subsided a few hours into the hike. Callum's earlier comment about them simply being travellers seemed prophetic. It felt good walking side by side as equals.

The friendly warmth Rym had shown Callum back at the outpost, however, had dissipated. He wasn't ornery or cryptic with his words as before. Instead, he pulled from a narrow emotional palette, sprinkled with moments of private sulkiness—the consequence of Callum's decision to return home. That the pactrid was so greatly affected showed what Callum meant to him, and given the strange pull Callum felt for Rym—feelings he still couldn't put into words—he contemplated stopping more than once. But he had to remind himself it simply wasn't feasible. There were too many unknowns to consider staying.

Rym remained tactful, never broaching the subject again, at least not directly. Nevertheless, his silver eyes did little to hide his disheartenment. Even after the second day, Callum could sense the pactrid's anticipation in hopes he'd change his mind. It pained him

to disappoint Rym, but being so close to their destination had settled his decision.

Roads narrowed to footpaths the closer they reached the line. The forest seemed never-ending—their thick trunks attracting Anberans like a moth to lamplight. To know they'd been trespassing onto pactrid territory, killing them and cutting down their trees, brought yet another wave of shame over Callum.

A platoon of pactrid troops, huddled in the bush a dozen metres from the path, caught Callum's eye. His arrival brought several frowns from the soldiers—some confused, some angry—but Rym's salute in greeting acted as a pacifier. Some soldiers wore the protective scale armour all Anberan infantry feared.

"Are we getting close?" Callum asked.

"Yes. These soldiers are a mix of scouts and fighters."

"Are they preparing to attack?"

Rym shook his head.

"But why are they wearing armour?"

"It's a precaution."

They continued north another five minutes until reaching a break in the treeline. Scouts, hidden behind stout trunks, sat at regular intervals along the line. Rym approached the closest scout.

"Report."

The scout eyed Callum with suspicion, then turned his attention to Rym. "Nothing to report. It's been quiet all day."

Rym nodded. "I'm returning this human." He turned to Callum. "Show him your pass."

Callum stiffened in surprise at the request, then jammed a hand in his pocket to retrieve the silver token, giving it to the scout. It was tiny in the pactrid's enormous hands. After a cursory look, he returned it with a nod in greeting.

"I wish more humans were like you," the scout said.

"I do, too," Callum replied.

"Come, now," Rym said, ushering Callum with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

They walked side by side at an unhurried pace. All the while, Rym's hand never broke contact. Callum welcomed it, but couldn't help feeling torn again. Upon reaching the forest's edge, Rym crouched before him.

"Goodbye, Cal'oom," he said, resting a palm upon Callum's chest—his heart. He'd never done that before. The act expressed the

sentiment of farewell better than words ever could.

"I'm sorry I couldn't stay."

Rym closed his eyes, his deep voice full of sorrow. "I understand your reasons, your concerns. They are valid. However, that does nothing to hush the turmoil within me."

Callum's throat tightened, and he blinked away the burn in his eyes. Nothing he could say in reply felt appropriate. Rym saved him from the hesitation by opening his satchel and rummaging inside.

"This belongs to you," he said, presenting Callum's knife in its sheath.

Callum scoffed, causing a rogue tear to fall. He abruptly wiped his eyes and accepted it. "I'd forgotten about it. Thank you." Glad to have something else to focus on—to conceal his emotions—he strapped the sheath to his belt and tested its stability.

"There's one more thing I want to give you," Rym said, pulling out a rolled-up sheaf of parchment, its edges frayed and ragged. From a small pouch, he retrieved a stick of charcoal. "Turn around and remove your bag."

Bearing a confused frown, Callum followed the request. Rym spread the parchment on his back and wrote something.

"What are you doing?"

Rym finished before replying. "In case you do return, remember to have your pass clearly in hand and held over your head. Either approach any pactrid soldier you encounter, or, more likely, you will be ambushed." While he spoke, he used his knife to cut the parchment, carefully folding it, then handing it to Callum. "A warning: even with the pass, you may be treated poorly, but you will not be harmed. You will be taken to the nearest refugee village."

"But—"

Rym crouched and tapped the note in Callum's hand. "This is a request for the soldiers that take you into custody, asking that a message be sent to me informing of your arrival."

Callum closed his hand around the parchment. "But Rym, I don't think I'll be coming back."

The pactrid smiled, his silver eyes sparkling in the afternoon sun. "Maybe not, but is there any harm in hoping?"

Callum smiled back, his own eyes itching again. "I'll never forget you."

"Nor I." Rym held a palm to Callum's cheek, caressing it a

moment before standing. “Safe travels, pup.”

Although Rym’s hand no longer touched his face, Callum could still feel it, like an echo. He wanted to say goodbye, but his throat had seized up again. Rather than risk his voice cracking, he gave the pactrid a reverent bow of the head, then slipped the parchment into his pocket and shouldered his rucksack.

Stepping across the treeline, he shielded his eyes from the sun. The field was a mess of roughly hewn tree stumps. Beyond, perhaps a kilometre away, tents from a garrison camp jutted out on the horizon. Refusing to fight the urge, Callum glanced back to Rym. The pactrid remained where he stood—hidden just within the forest—imparting a hint of a nod. Callum offered a wistful smile in return, finding it difficult to pull his gaze away. Not because he couldn’t, but because he hated to.

Refusing to put it off any longer, he marched toward the camp. Whiffs of freshly cut lumber filled his nose as he travelled amid the tree stumps. The treeline to his left and right wavered in the distance, with many trees felled but not harvested—telling a story where lumberjacks had to retreat in order to escape advancing pactrids. Callum still found it difficult to believe Anberans were the invaders. That so many of his kind had died believing the opposite.

Out of the protective shadow of the trees—something Callum had grown to appreciate—he found the sun oppressively hot. A sliver of the moon, barely visible in the blue sky, was near its apex. The Roaming Sea would be at its fiercest. He longed to be at the cliffs near his home, the city of Anbera, mesmerised by those ponderous waves following in the moon’s wake. The crisp, cool breeze they brought. *Soon.*

The thought of Rym by his side, enjoying the experience of the sea tides, brought a knot to his stomach. He dared to look back. The pactrid was still there, standing at the edge of the forest, watching him. Callum held up a hand timorously—after all, they’d already said their farewells more than once—but he refused to hide how he felt. Rym returned it—a deliberate raising of the hand, holding it there for a time—and then he retreated to the shadows. Callum couldn’t help thinking he’d just made the worst decision in his life.

Rym’s note came to mind, as well as the silver token. Both were in his trouser pocket. If anyone found them, surely that would arouse suspicion. He emptied the contents of his rucksack onto the ground. Retrieving the note and token from his pocket, he placed

them at the bottom of the sack, and then repacked his belongings on top.

He continued his trek through the destroyed forest toward the camp. A sentry walking the perimeter caught sight of him and rushed to his position.

"Where'd you come from?" the sentry asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Callum said. "What company is this?"

The sentry gave him a queer look before replying. "632nd. I need to know where you came from, though. Show me your identification."

Callum dug out papers from his jacket's inside pocket. "I'm with 174th. I managed to survive a transport accident. A pactrid attack interrupted—"

"You're with 174th?" The sentry's face lit up in surprise. "You're damn right those 'trids attacked. They hit the line hard."

"What?!"

"Yeah. Six companies were decimated. Command tried to tamp down the news, but man, you can't keep that kind of attack quiet for long."

It took a moment for Callum to process what he was hearing. Were all his fellow comrades dead? What about his friend, Oren, who'd just started his tenday shift. "Are you saying no one made it back alive?" he stammered.

The sentry handed back Callum's papers. "I mean, some made it back to headquarters, but the numbers were pretty low." Seeing how Callum was reacting to the news, the sentry planted a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"I gotta get back to headquarters. Get debriefed."

"Sure, sure." The sentry pointed northeast. "The transport tent is that way."

"Thanks."

Callum shook the man's hand and then ran headlong into the camp, dodging soldiers between various tents. Despite his best efforts, he bumped into a few men, earning vulgar insults for his recklessness. He barely acknowledged them. All he cared about now was to get home. His mother came to mind again. Most likely, she would've been told Callum was dead, disregarding the fact his body would've never been recovered.

The telltale sign of a transport tent, much taller than any other,

poked out ahead of him. He knocked aside the entrance flap and ran inside, huffing from the exertion. The transport circle was empty.

"Hello?" he called out.

"Yes?" The voice emerged from a hidden partition on the opposite side.

Callum peeked around the corner to find two men sitting at a desk. "I'm Hidaro. Medic from 174th Company. I need to get to headquarters."

One man stood, a corporal. "Whoa, whoa, slow down. What are you saying?"

After taking a deep breath, Callum repeated what he told the sentry.

"That was—what—six days ago? Where have you been all this time?" the corporal asked.

Callum faltered at the question. He hadn't considered how he'd explain what had happened. If he was to tell anyone the truth about the war, he couldn't hide everything. "I was caught, taken prisoner, but then they let me go."

The corporal stared at him. "They just . . . let you go?" His tone was one of doubt and disbelief. "Let's see your papers."

Callum handed them over, glimpsing the other man still seated —likely the transporter—listening in on the conversation. Each transporter had a corporal with them at all times, acting as a bodyguard of sorts. Given their importance and worth, Callum was surprised a larger detail wasn't assigned to protect them.

"So, medic Hidaro, did these 'trids give any indication why they let you go?" the corporal asked, returning his identification.

"Sir, I've learnt a great deal while I was in their custody. I hate for this to sound grandiose, but it could change the outcome of the war."

The corporal snorted at the proclamation.

"I need to get back to headquarters to give my full report," Callum continued. "I can't wait for the next scheduled transport."

A sigh escaped the corporal's lips as he contemplated the request.

"Please," Callum pleaded. "My mother likely thinks I'm dead. My father's already gone, and I'm her only remaining son."

This knowledge broke the corporal's resolve. "Very well." With a snap of his finger, the transporter stood and followed them to the

other side of the partition.

"Thank you, sir," Callum said, followed by another thank you directly to the transporter, who offered a smile in reply, but otherwise remained mute.

Callum took his position in the circle while the corporal stood guard at the tent's flap. The transporter closed his eyes, and the glowing yellow barrier immediately rose from the transport circle. Given the man's age, there was no doubt he was a seasoned professional, and before Callum could think of the transport accident that had incited the entire ordeal, he was standing in headquarters.

The stone-walled room was empty. Its sconces were unlit and cold. Unsurprising, given it was an unscheduled transport. But it was then Callum realised he had no clue where to go to provide his report, and his training never covered such a circumstance. He knew where administration was, so he figured that was the best place to start.

The admin building was on the far side of the military precinct, so the walk took nearly twenty minutes. Inside, there wasn't any kind of reception area or admittance desk, only a series of large offices. Most of the desks were empty—after all, it was getting late into the afternoon. Callum's patience was wearing thin. He risked appearing like a fool and approached the nearest clerk, a woman about his age. Stacks of paper covered her desk, and she was engrossed in her task, not noticing Callum draw near. He cleared his throat to catch her attention.

Without looking up, she raised a finger. "Just a moment," she said while writing something down. Once finished, she glanced up, then gasped in shock.

Callum supposed she was expecting a colleague, not a soldier wearing a filthy uniform and a scraggly beard. He took a step back and raised his hands in apology. He didn't know how to start. "My name's Hidaro, a medic of 174th Company. I was there when they were attacked six days ago. I was captured and detained by pactrids —"

"Wait. Hold on. I don't understand why you're telling me this."

Callum let out a frustrated sigh. "I don't know where to go, who to talk to. I need to be debriefed. I've got important information."

She shook her head in regret. "I've no idea how to help you."

“Is there someone here with a higher rank? Someone must know how this works.”

“I’m sorry. Ranking officers have already left for the day.”

Callum swore under his breath. This was ridiculous. He imparted a curt thank you and turned to leave, but the woman called out to stop him.

“Please tell me again, your name and company?” she asked.

“Hidaro. 174th.”

She wrote it down. “And you were a prisoner?”

It felt strange to hear it spoken aloud by someone else, and Callum could only nod in reply.

“I’ll see what I can do, but I’d recommend returning in the morning.”

He thanked her again, trying his best to be courteous, but undoubtedly she noticed his frustration. Stepping outside, he considered who could possibly help him. Was his sergeant still alive? Where would he be? If the company’s losses were too high, surviving members would likely be incorporated into another company.

He pushed the frustration from his mind. There was something more important to contend with now. His mother.

• • •

By the time he’d reached the residential quarter where his mother lived, long shadows from the setting sun were drawing across neatly arranged apartment units. This time of day was always beautiful in the city. The red clay roof tiles almost glowed in the sun’s warm rays.

He approached her front door and gave it a tentative knock. It was at that moment he realised he should’ve gone to the baths, shaved, and changed into something clean first, but the idea of waiting any longer to spare her the grief felt wrong. Footsteps from within drew near, and the door opened. Casting a weary face, she didn’t look up at first, instead staring at his boots.

“Mum,” Callum said.

She glanced up at his voice—her eyes tired and red, looking to have aged ten years in a day. He recognised that face. He’d seen it

before when his dad was killed, and again with his two brothers. Her lips twitched before she spoke.

"Callum?"

The shock of seeing his face caused her to step back, losing her balance in the process. Her arms flailed helplessly.

"Mum!"

Before she hit the floor, Callum vaulted forward and caught her in his arms. He helped her up, but had to hold her weight. Her legs refused to work.

"Callum," she whispered, touching his face. "They said . . ."

"Come, let's sit down."

He closed the door and helped her to the couch in the lounge. Once she was seated, he unshouldered his rucksack and sat beside her. Without a doubt, his dirty trousers would leave a mark, but he felt it was a small price to pay to console his mother.

"What did they tell you?" he asked.

Time lingered as she collected her thoughts. "The 'trids attacked your camp, destroying everything. So many dead, Callum. So many. They never found your body, but assumed you were killed."

"Did they mention the transport accident?"

She frowned in confusion. "No."

The attack must've been so tumultuous that it was never reported. He pondered if the corporal and the young transporter ever made it out alive.

"I was in a transport bubble when the attack happened. It was interrupted."

Terror filled her eyes. "How did you survive?"

Hating to see her in such pain, he hugged her close. "It doesn't matter. I'm okay. I'm here. I'm alive."

She sobbed against his shoulder, hands gripping his uniform as though to confirm he was real. "How did you get home?"

He recounted his ordeal in detail. It took time, but once he was done, she'd recovered from the worst of her grief.

"I still don't understand why the 'trids let you go. You mentioned this go . . . gotac—"

"*Gotachi*, yeah. She said I was a rare human, and I could be freed."

"But why?"

Callum bit his lip. His secret belief had been withheld for so

long, he had assumed it would die with him. Now, with everything that was possibly at stake, it felt like a trivial matter. “Because I don’t believe in this war, mum.”

The stare he received was as though he’d grown a third arm. “How can you say that? Would you spit on the graves of your father and brothers?”

“Of course not!”

She glared at him from the corner of her eye, indignation written on her face. “And would you let them take our land? What’s rightfully ours?”

“That’s the worst part, mum. The land we’re fighting for *isn’t* ours.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “What have those ’trids done to my son?”

“The pactrid who found me showed me the truth. There’s a giant ridge of mountains to the south. They act as the border between our lands.”

“What mountains?”

“That was exactly my question. But he’s been alive since the war began. He witnessed it firsthand. *We* instigated it when we crossed into their territory. They told us to leave. Instead, we killed them and started harvesting their trees.”

“How could you believe such lies?”

“He showed the mountains to me.”

“What? How far did you travel?”

“We didn’t travel there. He—” Callum swallowed. He knew this wasn’t going to end well, but he was in too deep by this point. “Pactrids have an ability to show others what’s in their minds. He laid his hand on my head, told me to close my eyes, and I *saw* his memory of it.”

Soured lips pursed taut, she shook her head and a single tear dropped to her cheek. Callum’s chest tightened at the sight.

“Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth?” she asked sullenly, her voice shuddering. “Whatever you saw was a lie. This monster’s touch has poisoned your mind.”

He lifted her hand and kissed it. “Please don’t be angry, mum.”

“You misunderstand me. I’m not angry at you. I’m disappointed.”

Those words cut like daggers in his heart. “But mum—”

“I’m disappointed you would believe their filthy lies. That you

don't believe in the importance of this war."

Unable to meet her critical gaze, Callum cast his eyes down. "I'm sorry, but it's the truth. I never did. Even as a kid, I wished we could find peace, somehow."

"With the 'trids, there is no peace. All they bring is pain and suffering."

"I'm upsetting you," Callum said, nudging her hair aside to kiss her forehead. "I'll come back when you're feeling better, okay? And we won't talk about pactrids or the war."

She didn't respond. Instead, she gazed into her empty hands.

"I love you, mum."

He waited, but barbed silence was the only reply he received. Shouldering his rucksack, he left her sitting in the lounge, and stepped outside. Late evening air—accompanied by the subtle hint of salty tang from the Roaming Sea—drifted against his sweaty face. *What just happened?*

What should've been a joyous reunion ended in a heated argument. He'd never seen his mother so upset before, and being the cause brought a lump to his throat. After everything she'd been through, she didn't deserve more anguish.

His thoughts shifted to Oren. He deserved to know Callum was alright, too. But Callum didn't know if his friend had escaped the massacre, and wasn't sure if he was mentally prepared to learn the truth. If he were alive, how would he react to Callum's experience with Rym? Would he give Callum the benefit of the doubt, or would he shun him as his mother had?

Callum wiped his face with a hand. There were too many unknowns, and night was nearly upon the city. As wrong as it felt, he decided to wait. He could visit Oren and Greta tomorrow. Now, however, Callum felt lost at what to do. Having subsisted on travel rations the past few days, he should eat a proper meal, but his belly felt full of lead. Perhaps the baths would make a welcome diversion.

Before doing that, though, he wished to rid himself of his rucksack. The shoulder straps were digging in, and he had long grown tired of the weight. Upon entering his apartment and dumping his sack, his nose wrinkled at the stuffy air. Feeling his way through the dark room, he opened a window to let in the fresh breeze. He stood there, motionless, breathing it in. The moon—beaming high in the sky—produced stark, angular shadows upon

row after row of apartments akin to his own.

He suddenly yearned for the trees, and their gentle rustling leaves in the wind. He longed to hear Rym's baritone voice, to behold his mysterious smile, and yield to the firm touch of his warm hands.

Pulling himself back from his memory, the secrets hidden at the bottom of his rucksack came to mind. He lit a candle, emptied the sack, then retrieved the parchment and silvery token. Unfolding the note, he found the message written in charcoal had smudged a bit. But had he been able to read it—the text consisted of a series of intersecting lines—he believed it was still legible.

Pushing his bed away from the wall, he knelt down and dislodged a short section of floor moulding with his knife. Within the cavity sat a small leather bag—his savings. Pushing the bag aside, he stashed the parchment and token, and then carefully replaced the moulding, banging it into place. The fit was tight enough to hold the section without the need of a nail.

The hot baths were the restorative cure he'd hoped for. Sinking into one of the large pools, he lay up to his neck in water and placed a wet cloth over his face. The place was busy. Normally that would bother him with other bathers chatting and laughing nearby, but he found himself able to shut them away this time. He nearly drifted off after a short period—no doubt he was sleep deprived. The weight in his belly soon dissipated, revealing the truth that his hunger existed.

Having washed the grime from his skin and following through with a proper shave, Callum headed to his favourite pub for a late supper. The proprietor knew Callum well and offered a warm welcome. Of course, he had no idea what Callum had gone through, didn't know his company number. That was fine. He was in no mood to discuss it.

The proprietor served a chicken pie with a delicate crusty top, filled with delectable vegetables, and oozing a thick gravy. There was a reason this pub was his preferred place to eat. However, after a few mouthfuls, his mouth turned dry in spite of the gravy. Each bite turned to ash once in his mouth. Swallowing was a chore. He managed to finish half the pie before he had to stop. Whatever appetite he had was lost again.

After apologising to the proprietor, who took no offence, Callum stepped outside. He knew he should return home and get

some sleep, but the sea called to him. The walk to the high clifftops wasn't far, and the moon lit his way along the well-trod path across a grassy field. No matter the occasion—day or night—the view of the sea always had an audience. This time was no different. There were a number of single folk, such as himself, as well as a few couples. Sparse conversation was hushed, not wanting to ruin the distant crash of the sea against the rocky cliffside. Myriad white peaks on the water reflected in the moonlight, producing a hypnotic pattern Callum enjoyed losing himself in.

This place would always remind him of his father. Callum longed for his company, wishing to receive a more levelheaded view of his encounter with Rym. But he couldn't deny his mother's words hadn't affected him. It was true Callum hadn't seen those mountains firsthand. He'd only witnessed an image—a memory—and that could've been a fabrication. Rym's recount of the war's inception was potentially a lie. Perhaps he used Callum's disdain of the war to compel him to believe. But everything he said, and the way he spoke, felt undeniably true. While it was hard to believe, deep down Callum knew there wasn't a moment he didn't believe him. Was he a fool to trust his enemy so readily? Was Rym ever truly his enemy? Or did Callum want peace so badly that he would believe anything to fulfil that desire?

With all these conflicting thoughts swimming through his head, he couldn't be sure what the truth was anymore. He longed for wisdom from a reputable source, but at this moment, he was clueless who could provide any trustworthy answers.

• • •

From the moment Callum laid his head on the pillow, he slept like the dead—an empty lapse of memory between then and now. Shafts of sunlight streamed through gaps in the curtains, swaying gently in the breeze of the open window. He'd been dreaming. The details were a haze, but Rym was there, smiling. Something had interrupted his dream, woken him.

Before having a moment to consider it, a banging on his door startled him. Still muddleheaded from sleep, he nearly tripped over his own feet trying to approach the unruly offender.

“Who is it?” he demanded.

“Privates Smithson and Blears,” a voice replied, muffled by the wooden door. “Are you medic Hidaro?”

“Yes?” Callum replied hesitantly.

“We need to escort you to headquarters.”

“An escort? Why?”

“Something about a debrief. I dunno, they don’t tell us nothin’.”

Callum frowned, but couldn’t fault the soldier for his ignorance. “Let me get dressed,” he called out.

A fist pounded on the door again. “You gotta let us in now.”

“I’m naked!”

“We don’t care. Open the door. We have our orders.”

“You have orders to watch me dress?” Callum asked sardonically.

The banging came yet again, harder this time. “Just open the damn door or we’ll be forced to—”

“Fine! Fine!”

Callum unbolted the lock and knocked the latch free to show it was open. The door swung wide and two soldiers entered while he dressed in a clean uniform. Once again, Callum found himself uncharacteristically shy about his naked body. This shouldn’t have bothered him, but he supposed being watched in the privacy of his own home played a part. At least they weren’t openly staring.

“Seriously, why couldn’t you wait outside?” Callum asked.

“Sorry,” one man replied, mildly off-put by the situation as well. “They said if you tried to stall us, we had to get in.”

“Stall you? Why would I do that?”

The soldier shrugged. “That’s just what they said.”

Callum pulled on his boots and gestured to the two men. “Okay, lead the way.”

The two troopers flanked him as they made their way back to headquarters. Despite Callum’s unfettered hands, an underlying suspicion evoked his time with the pactrids. Having never performed an official debrief before, he didn’t know the process, but this didn’t feel right. He considered asking the soldiers some blunt questions—maybe find out what they were told about him—but decided against it. That’d only raise their hackles. After all, they were only following orders, and likely didn’t have the answers he sought.

Upon reaching the precinct, they led him toward one of the many nondescript, multilevel stone buildings. Stairs led up, and once they reached the landing, one escort knocked on a sturdy wooden door.

"Enter," a voice replied from within.

The soldier opened the door, giving Callum a nudge to walk in. Looking back, Callum found the two men crowding the doorway, blocking any opportunity to slip out. He didn't want to escape, but the way they were behaving led him to believe he should. *What is going on?*

The office, lit by morning sun through a large window, was inviting. A older man—obviously career military—sat behind a wide, orderly desk. His uniform was clean and crisp, the insignia displaying his rank of colonel. An impressive array of medals held in wooden frames adorned the wall behind the man. Callum straightened, unaware he'd be speaking to such a high-ranking officer. According to protocol, he should've been reporting to a captain.

"Medic Hidaro reporting for debrief, sir," he announced with a salute.

The colonel's moustache—large and bushy—obscured his mouth, but Callum felt sure he was smiling amicably. His matching eyebrows, arched up, helped to confirm the assumption. He gestured to the chair opposite the desk. "Please. Sit," he said, then turned his attention to the two soldiers at the door. "You two, close the door and wait out there."

"Yes, sir," they exclaimed in unison, each with their own salute, and then obeyed his order.

The colonel opened a file folder and thumbed the single piece of parchment within. Not much was written on it.

"I'm Colonel Wrenn. You made quite the commotion yesterday within the administration wing."

Callum raised his hands in concession. "I apologise, sir. I didn't know who to speak to, and had no way of contacting my commanding officer. I don't even know what's become of my company."

"You were with 174th?"

"Yes, sir."

Wrenn nodded sullenly. "I'm not sure what you've heard, but 174th was hit hardest. I'd say a scant ten per cent escaped with

their lives."

Callum found it difficult to parse the colonel's words. What he said seemed unreal, impossible. He stared blankly at the desk, feeling lightheaded, having to blink to regain focus.

"I'm sorry, son," the colonel added, reading the despair on Callum's face. He tapped the parchment. "It says here you were in a transport accident."

"Yes. It happened during the attack. The transporter tried his best, but he was just a kid. It took too long and the corporal had to take him to safety." Callum caught the colonel's eye. "To be clear, I don't blame the kid. Do you know if he survived?"

The colonel nodded. "Each company's set of transporters managed to escape, retreating to neighbouring companies along the line once the attack was over."

"I guess that's something to be thankful for," Callum muttered.

"After the accident, where did you end up?" Wrenn asked while dipping a pen into an inkwell.

Callum recounted the story again, omitting the private moments he had with Rym, but he did mention his ability to speak the pactrid language. All the while, the colonel scribbled notes he felt pertinent to include in the file. Callum concluded by saying, "I know of one infantryman who survived the transport accident, Ralph Hindle."

The colonel reached for another folder, this one filled with a sheaf of parchments. From Callum's position, he could spot a list of names, each with their own status.

"We had him marked as missing in action," Wrenn said. "Did he escape with you?"

Callum shook his head. "I'm sorry to report he was hanged."

Despite the thick moustache, the colonel's grim face was evident. He dipped his pen into the inkwell and updated the dead man's status.

"I was wondering," Callum added. "Could you check if someone else is on that list? Medic Oren Bains. He'd just started his shift when the attack began."

Wrenn flipped through the pages, muttering Oren's name. His finger dropped to an entry, then hesitantly dragged across to reveal his status. A curt sigh told Callum all he needed to know.

"A friend of yours?"

The realisation Oren was gone was difficult for Callum to

grasp. What about his kid and his wife, Greta? What about their child to come? For them to be without a husband and father felt unjust. What had they done to deserve such a loss? Callum could relate, but didn't make it any easier to accept.

"How did you escape?" the colonel asked.

Callum blinked. "Excuse me?"

"The outpost where you were imprisoned. How did you escape?"

The ball of lead in Callum's belly returned. "I didn't. I was escorted back to the front lines."

The colonel's thick eyebrows knit together in a confused frown.

"Let me back up a bit," Callum said. "Before Hindle was hanged, he was questioned by a pactrid who has a special ability to . . . read a person's intent." This only caused the colonel's stare to grow more intense as Callum continued. "They read his intent to confirm he was their enemy, and they hanged him for it."

"So, what are you saying, Hidaro? That you're not their enemy, and they let you go?"

"I don't know," Callum replied, unable to meet the colonel's gaze.

"Well, the fact you're here now tells me one thing. Either you're an excellent liar, or a 'trid sympathiser."

Callum's eyes grew wide. "Not at all!"

"So you tricked them?"

"I did nothing. They saw . . . the truth. That's what they said." He couldn't continue—couldn't say he didn't believe in the war, that he only wanted peace. That was the truth, yet the only person who'd accept it was Rym. *What am I doing here?*

"What truth did they see, Hidaro?"

"I don't know, sir. But whatever it was, they said I was free to go."

Wrenn's once friendly face was now stern. "You obviously didn't lie to them, but it's clear as day you're lying to me now."

"I'm telling the truth. They let me go."

"Don't twist my words. You know what I'm talking about. They hanged that trooper, but not you. That's unusual, wouldn't you say?"

"Wait, wait! Let me explain," Callum pleaded. "When the scout was marshalling me to that outpost, he told me how the war started."

“You know how it began. You were told, like every child of Anbera.”

“Yes, I was told the pactrids came to conquer us, and we’ve been fighting back for over a century.”

“Exactly.”

“But this pactrid showed me something different. Unlike us, he’s been alive since before the war began. He said we started it. We trespassed onto their land, past mountains marking our borders, and then set about harvesting their trees.”

The colonel frowned again. “What mountains?”

“I asked the same question. And then he . . . showed me.”

“How?”

“I don’t know if anyone’s aware of this, but”—Callum bit his lip—“pactrids have this ability to share their memories through touch.”

The anger on Wrenn’s face had shifted to concern for Callum. “What did he do to you?”

“He touched my head and shared his memory of scouting beyond the front line. Instead of discovering our farming villages and the city, he arrived at a towering ridge of mountains. He called them the Spine.”

“There are no mountains between here and the front lines.”

“I mean no disrespect, sir, but can either of us state that as truth? We only travel by transport to the front lines. Does anyone know how far south we’ve pushed in the past century?”

Callum should’ve been chewed out for insubordination, but the colonel appeared genuinely nonplussed contemplating the question. “Sir, if this is true and we’re the ones in the wrong, we could end this war.”

The colonel shook his head. “Even if that were the case, we still need that lumber. We wouldn’t survive without it.” He let out a deep sigh. “Regardless, it’s clear they’ve done something to you. I suspect the ’trid touching you inflicted some kind of forced suggestion.”

“But, shouldn’t we at least try to confirm—”

“You’ll have to be put through reeducation.”

“What?” Callum stammered.

The colonel raised his hands to settle him. “It’s nothing to be concerned about, but rest assured, once it’s complete, you’ll no longer be burdened by these troubling thoughts.”

Callum had no idea what that entailed and had no interest in finding out. He stood up to leave. “That won’t be necessary, sir.”

“It’s not your decision to make. Hey! I didn’t say you were dismissed.”

Callum rushed to the door and pulled it open, finding the two soldiers flanking the exit. Each turned their attention to him, confused.

“Detain him!” Wrenn shouted.

Without hesitation, the two soldiers grabbed Callum’s arms and then slammed him into the stone wall. Callum struggled for only a moment, realising it would only cause him more trouble. The colonel approached, his brows once again angled down in anger.

“Who else knows of these treasonous lies?”

The last thing Callum wanted was to get his mother involved in this madness. “No one!” He hoped the lie was believable, and judging by the colonel’s reaction, it passed.

“Take our medic to the gaoler,” he said to the soldiers, then eyed Callum suspiciously. “We can’t have you spreading these ’trid lies.”

By this point, Callum knew better than to tender a contrary response, but that didn’t stop him from glaring back, looking deep into the colonel’s eyes. What he hoped to find was at least the smallest shred of doubt brought on by Callum’s statement, but instead he found nothing of the sort. The colonel’s eyes were stone. What Wrenn believed could not be shaken by the words of a seemingly compromised, low-ranking medic.

The gaol cells were elsewhere within the precinct, but where exactly, Callum wasn’t sure. Of course, his new captors knew the way—each guiding him by twisting his arms behind his back. If Callum was determined enough, he felt he could wrestle out of their grasp and run. But where would he go? And how would he escape the precinct with two shouting troopers snapping at his heels? No doubt someone ahead of Callum would witness the skirmish and block his way.

No, it was best to remain compliant for now. They couldn’t hold him forever—*could they?*—nor were his actions dire enough to warrant an execution. Right now, patience was key. He’d play along until they’d lower their defences, then he’d make his escape. Back to pactrid territory. Back to Rym.

After waiting for prisoner forms to be filled out, Callum was—

yet again—stripped naked for his captors. But upon slipping into ill-fitting overalls, dread washed over him. The compass was missing. It took a moment to recall himself removing it yesterday before he'd headed to the baths. He could visualise it now, sitting on the bedside table. He always wore it, but he'd forgotten this morning due to the rude awakening. In a way, it was ideal he'd overlooked it. The compass was safer out of the hands of the gaoler.

Callum couldn't help a wry smile cross his face once the metal gate to his cell slammed home. Compared to his time at the pactrid outpost, this was a substantial improvement. The floor was clean, folded linen sat atop a cot, and the chamber pot didn't stink. He suspected he'd be stuck here for a while, so at least the space wasn't terrible. The only drawback, given the cells were underground, was the lack of daylight. An oil lamp—its glass grimy with soot—hung in the hallway, producing a sliver of orange, flickering light into his cramped space. The gaol, smaller than expected, only comprised six cells. Callum called out, curious if any other prisoners were locked up, but the adjoining cells remained silent.

With a sigh, he spread out the linen over the cot and lay down. He tried to sleep, but his mind refused to settle. The events of the past seven days kept replaying in his mind. During his entire time with Rym, he never felt the pactrid was trying to deceive him. Sure, Rym was tight-lipped at times, unwilling to share information freely, but never did Callum feel he was being lied to. It wasn't until he recounted his experience with his mother—and more so with the colonel—did the cracks of doubt within himself begin to emerge.

What if they were right? What if the pactrid's story was a fabrication to instil strife within the Anberan military ranks? Rym had shown him the mountains, but those projected images could've been a deceptive tool to trick him.

Callum's fascination toward the pactrid, however, was real. At least, he hoped it was. He still couldn't properly construe his feelings about Rym—a complicated attraction difficult to pin down. As much as he hated to admit it, a part of it was physical. The pactrid's muscular stature and looming height was exciting and alluring, but not in a sexual nature. He simply felt safe with Rym by his side, and the idea of the pactrid holding him close brought a sense of fulfilment he'd always been searching for.

More importantly was Rym's demeanour. That's what attracted him most. Callum could foresee a faint seed of friendship, which if

allowed to bloom, would be more extraordinary than anything he could imagine.

Did Rym's touch somehow trick him into feeling this way? If so, to what end? The pactrid's wish for Callum to stay felt undoubtedly genuine, and was compounded by his disappointment upon learning of Callum's request to return home. If his story was a ruse to create conflict, he would've wanted Callum to leave.

He buried his face in his hands, uttering a frustrated groan. So many unanswered questions, and now being locked in this cell with no way to discover the truth. As hard as it was, he pushed all that aside. His current predicament was more important. Colonel Wrenn spoke of *reeducation*. Despite being unable to fathom what that involved, Callum shuddered at the idea. Would he forget everything he'd learnt while in enemy territory?

Worse yet, would he forget about Rym?

FIVE

Truth's Hardship

Without a view of the sun or moon, the passing of time was impossible to determine. Callum had fitfully dozed off, only to realise the corridor lamp—his only source of light—had guttered out. Another distant flicker continued to burn beyond his line of sight, however, revealing a black form near the bottom of his cell door. The shape moved, tapping softly against the metal bars. He recoiled in shock, banging his head against the wall.

"Hidaro," the shape whispered—a woman's voice. She was crouched on her haunches.

"Yes?" he replied with a nervous inflexion.

"I'm getting you outta here," she stated, fiddling with the lock.

"Who are you?"

With a turn and a pull, the cell door sprung open. "Call me Eleanor. Now, mouth shut. Put this on."

A thrown sack landed at his feet. It held trousers, a long-sleeved shirt, soft-soled shoes, leather gloves, and a hood that hung low to cover his face and neck. Even in the gloom, it was easy to see every article of clothing was black.

"Quick. Time's short," she whispered.

While she kept watch in the corridor, he shimmied out of his baggy overalls and donned the new clothing. It fit him surprisingly well—its material thin yet resilient—tailored in a way to contour his body without restricting movement. A little tight in the crotch, perhaps, but he wasn't about to voice a complaint. She gestured for him to exit the cell, and then locked the gate shut with her tools.

Eleanor's own attire closely matched his own. Black fabric wrapped around her head and face, leaving only a tiny slit open for her eyes. She looked deadly, and Callum was glad to know she was on his side. But why was she helping him? He knew he'd have to wait to learn her motives.

Using hand signals, she told him to stick close to her, and then proceeded toward the other oil lamp at the end of the corridor. She doused it, sinking them into complete darkness. Callum felt a hand reach out and he took it, allowing her to guide him blindly along a branching corridor. Rounding a corner, flickering light emanated from the far end of a passageway. This was where he'd been admitted. The exit was near. Unsure what to expect, he apprehensively padded toward the light.

Reaching the admittance area, they found it deserted. Where were the guards? Even in the middle of the night—even if he was the only prisoner—there had to be someone keeping watch. As they crossed the space toward the stairwell leading up, something caught his ear. Reverberant chatter of two men came from the exit, followed by lighthearted chuckling. Eleanor grabbed his arm and pulled him into an unlit side room—storage space for prison garb, manacles, battered cups and plates. Footsteps scratched down the steps and crossed the admittance area. A chair shifted, then creaked under the weight of someone sitting. A bored yawn.

Despite Eleanor's hidden face, her eyes spoke volumes—annoyance at their unwanted guest. She peeked around the corner to appraise the gaoler. A brief moment passed, then she beckoned Callum to look. The man was sitting at a desk, slightly turned away from them, idly whittling at a piece of wood. Eleanor slipped her fingers into a hidden pocket and pulled free a small throwing knife. Before Callum could consider her next action, the knife was away—not aimed at the gaoler, but down the corridor they'd come from. It clattered, catching the man's attention. Eleanor and Callum fell back into hiding, hoping the bait would work.

"What was that?" the gaoler mumbled to himself.

He stood and grabbed the oil lamp sitting on his desk. Footsteps crunched on the stone floor, echoing as he explored deeper along the corridor. Eleanor risked a peek, and judging it safe, signalled for Callum to follow. The shoes he wore made it easy to sneak up the stairs silently, and they were soon outside.

The moon overhead shone brightly, and Eleanor kept them to the shadows. In their black garb, Callum felt invisible—bringing a sense of invigorating freedom. As ordered, he kept his mouth shut, but he couldn't envision their escape plan from here. The precinct was completely walled off from the rest of the city, with only two exits. Regardless of the time of day, he knew they were heavily guarded. Eleanor might be capable of a stealthy escape, but Callum didn't share her surefooted nature, feeling clumsy in comparison.

She led him between two large buildings to a disused, forgotten alleyway. Reaching the far end, a rope ladder hung from the stone wall.

"Wait 'til I reach the top," she whispered in his ear.

Without waiting for a reply, she climbed gracefully with no wasted movement. Upon cresting the wall, she gestured for Callum to join her. Placing his foot on the bottom rung, he tested his weight before committing. It bounced unnervingly. He clambered up, pulling himself close when it felt like the wobbling ladder was going to twist. She made it look so easy.

It took him an embarrassingly long time, but he eventually made it to the top. While he crouched for balance on the narrow capstones, she pulled up the ladder, secured by two grappling hooks anchored into the fortification. The opposite side of the wall ended in a sheer cliff. They wouldn't be able to descend here. Once the ladder was bundled up and tucked underarm, she stepped lightly atop the wall. Callum gaped at the sight. Did she really expect him to follow her? A wave of vertigo hit as he glanced down. If he fell, he'd break his neck.

Seeing Callum on his knees, nervously gripping the stone block, she returned and crouched in front of him. "Don't look down," she whispered. "Just keep your eyes ahead. It seems narrow, but it's not."

"Easy for you to say," he replied with a scoff.

"Give me your hand. Keep your eyes on me." He did so, and she urged him to stand, never breaking eye contact. "Now, keep your eyes on the back of my head."

She gently let go of his hand and he immediately felt unsteady. But then, holding his gaze forward, he took a tentative step. Then another. He seized that momentum and tried to keep his mind empty. If he thought too hard about what he was doing, he was sure to fall.

Eleanor watched his progress, making sure not to leave him behind. The wall jogged to the left and right as they forged ahead, forcing Callum to reposition himself without losing balance. Just as he was considering the risk of asking how much further to go, they reached another grappling hook. This one, however, led to freedom. Instead of a ladder, it was a length of rope with knots at regular intervals—its tail leading to a shed's roof.

She motioned for Callum to descend. He couldn't help a nervous chuckle escape his lips, but managed to edge his way down the rope with a bit of coaxing. He was thankful for the gloves. Without them, his hands would've been rope-burnt rappelling the wall. As soon as his feet touched the roof, she followed suit. Once again, she made it look easy. With no way to free the grappling hook, they abandoned it. They jumped the short distance to the ground, and Eleanor motioned for him to follow close.

The city's empty streets were eerily quiet. That didn't stop Eleanor from keeping to the shadows. She led him toward a residential quarter, employing lonely footpaths hidden by overgrown brush and neglected alleyways to take them there. They approached a nondescript residence, and after a rapid sweep to make sure no one was around, she unlocked the door and nudged him inside.

The space was dark. Not wanting to bump into anything, he stuck close to the entrance while she locked the door.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

She stepped past him and fumbled in the dark. Brief flashes of light—flint and steel—gave Callum a fleeting glimpse of the space. She soon had a flame going, using it to light a few candles. They were standing in a small kitchen.

"You don't need to whisper now. And I told you, it's Eleanor."

"Sorry. What I meant was, why did you risk yourself in helping me escape?"

Unwrapping the tight fabric from her head revealed shoulder-length flowing hair and a mischievous smile. "Because we're a rare breed, you and me."

The word *rare* reminded Callum of the *gotachi*, Neva. She said Callum was rare, too. “What makes us so special?”

“Word spread fast you were spared by the pactrids. That can only mean one thing: you don’t approve of the war.”

Callum pulled off his gloves and the hood, finding it stifling. “You don’t either?”

Eleanor twisted her face in disdain. “Of course not. The war is only an excuse to harvest lumber.”

Callum’s conversation with the colonel echoed in his mind. Was attaining lumber worth all this death? “But how did you know I was locked up?”

“You don’t listen, do you. I told you word spreads fast. We have people everywhere.”

“So, there’s more people like us?”

She laughed in a way that made him feel decidedly stupid. “Of course there are.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know?”

“Aw, I’m just teasin’ you. The rebel network is well hidden—it’s gotta be.”

“Rebels?”

She nodded. “And you’re our newest member.”

Callum held up his hands. “Whoa, hold on. I didn’t agree to anything.”

“You don’t have a choice, Hidaro. Your allegiances to the pactrids are known—”

“Allegiance? What are you talking about?”

“Listen. Either you’re with the humans or the pactrids. There’s no middle ground. This is a war, after all.”

“But I don’t want to fight *anyone*.”

She let out a sigh of concession. “None of us do, but these are things out of our control. All we can do is help the pactrids. They didn’t start this war. They’re the victims—not us.”

More echoed words, this time in Rym’s voice, but Callum was curious to hear her version of the past. “How do you know that?”

Eleanor thumbed at a chair, offering him to sit. “It’s a long story, but you deserve to know it.” She recounted the history between human and pactrid, and how the war began. It matched exactly what Rym had told him. Anberans travelled south, crossed a range of mountains, and harvested the trees. Pactrid emissaries came to stop them, explaining they were trespassing on their land.

Instead of heeding their request, the Anberans killed them and declared war. Since then, Anberans advanced further south, pushing back the pactrid troops and harvesting trees in the process.

"These mountains," Callum said, "has anyone seen them?"

Eleanor nodded. "Around thirty years ago, a squad of rebels made the pilgrimage south. They took maps with them, and what they found didn't match at all. Apparently, the mountains are huge and create an impasse east and west all the way to the sea."

Having seen the mountains through Rym's eyes, he could confirm their majestic grandeur. "So we've been told lies all this time." It wasn't a question, but Callum felt the need to speak it aloud.

"Yeah." Her voice was hushed, sombre. "And now, you need to get out of Anbera."

"But what about my life here? My mum?"

Eleanor shook her head. "I'm sorry. Unlike other rebels in the city, your cover is blown. If you stay here, it's only a matter of time 'til the higher-ups catch you."

Callum's thoughts returned to Rym. Would the pactrid still take him in? This might be his only option now, but it felt like he'd be intruding on Rym's life. What would living with Rym even entail?

"Any chance you have a pass?" Eleanor asked.

"You're talking about a silver token? Yeah, I was given one when they let me go."

Her eyes lit up. "Those are valuable." Then she swore under her breath. "Please don't say it was confiscated when you were gaoled."

Callum shook his head. "I hid it in my apartment."

"That's a good thing, Hidaro. That's your ticket to the rebel villages in pactrid territory."

"What? They mentioned villages for refugees, not rebels."

She stifled a laugh. "Refugees? Hardly. Maybe it's a bad translation thing. No, rebels live in those villages. They help the pactrids—mostly growing food crops, but there are armourers and weaponsmiths, too."

Callum's eyes grew wide. "Anberans are arming pactrids to fight the war?"

"Pretty wild, yeah? Anyway, having that pass will make things easier for you."

“But how can I get there? Do I have to walk? How far is that?”

“Don’t worry. We’ve got a contact at a farming village nearby. I’ll take you to him. He’s a transporter—old guy, retired. He can get you close to the front lines, but you’ll have to sneak past the camps and reach the safety of the forest. From there, you’re bound to cross paths with a pactrid squad. Just make sure you have that pass in hand, visible. Rebel or not, lots of those brutes hate us.”

Callum’s gaze fell. “Can you blame them?” He considered mentioning his time with Rym, and how the pactrid’s judgement of Callum had changed over the course of their time together. But that could pique her curiosity, and he didn’t want to deal with the embarrassment trying to explain their strange connection—a connection he still couldn’t properly comprehend.

“I never thanked you for getting me out of there,” he said. “I’ve got coin stashed away I could give you.”

She shrugged. “You wouldn’t be able to use those where you’re headed, so I won’t say no, but I don’t do this for the money. I’ll give your coin to the network instead. If you want to repay *me*, do it by standing on the side of what’s right. Don’t play into the hands of those who would control us with fear. Fight for happiness. Fight for joy. Fight for love. Fight for something worth living.”

Her words sounded like a mantra, akin to so many he’d repeated during his time in the army. Despite repeating those rallying calls countless times—hateful words describing the demise of their enemy—he never believed them in his heart. But what Eleanor spoke felt authentic, more in line with his own beliefs. He swallowed hard. “I’ll try my best.”

“We should get going,” she said, proceeding to wrap up her head in the dark fabric again. “You gotta be out of the city before sunup.”

Following her example, Callum donned his leather gloves and hood. “But I need to get that pass, and at least gather some clothes for the trip.”

“You can lead, then.”

“Wait,” Callum said with a start. “I don’t have the key to my apartment. The gaoler took it with the rest of my belongings.”

Eleanor tapped a long and narrow pouch hanging from her belt. “No sweat, Hidaro. I’ll pick it open.”

She blew out the candles and then poked her head outside to make sure the streets were still deserted. Upon receiving a thumbs

up, Callum stepped outside and led her toward his apartment. Reprising Eleanor's earlier actions, he kept out of the bright moonlight, hugging the walls and keeping to the shadows. He didn't know any shortcuts like she did, but they reached his home unseen.

Approaching his door, he found it broken open. Splintered wood gave the impression someone had taken an axe to it.

"I guess you didn't need a key after all," Eleanor whispered, then held out a hand to stop him from advancing. "Stay put."

Using a foot, she nudged the door wider. It was black inside. Slipping a hand into her pocket, she pulled out another throwing knife, although this time, she held it defensively. Gesturing again for Callum to hold his position, she disappeared inside.

He held his breath, perking his ears for any hint of an intruder lying in wait. It felt like an eternity, and his patience was swiftly unravelling. Just as he was about to take a step forward, Eleanor emerged from the gloom.

"It's clear," she whispered. "Get your stuff and make it quick. I'll stand watch. If you hear a whistle, it means you're out of time."

He nodded and squeezed past her, eager to know what had become of his apartment. His foot immediately bumped something, and in an attempt to step aside, he hit something else. How Eleanor searched the place without making a noise was a mystery. Callum allowed a moment for his eyes to adjust. A narrow shaft of moonlight streaked across the wall, imparting enough illumination to distinguish the mess before him. He found dresser drawers pulled out, their contents spilling out onto the floor. Table and chairs overturned. The bed pulled away from the wall. Books and keepsakes on shelves jostled and knocked down.

Careful to step over his possessions strewn at his feet, he reached the floor moulding containing his hidden stash. It was still held in place. Prying it open, he found everything intact—his savings, the pactrid pass, and perhaps most importantly for him, Rym's written message. Without that, Callum doubted he'd ever see Rym again. Glancing about, he found his trusty rucksack. It was tall, capable of holding a lot, but this would be the first time he'd test the limits of its capacity. He stowed the pass and parchment at the bottom, covered them with as much clothing he could stuff in, then topped it with an empty canteen. He'd have to fill it with water later. His knife found a home in a side pocket. A spare pair of boots were tied to a sturdy eyelet using their laces. He'd need them

—his other pair had been left in the cell. Then, reaching back into the wall's hidden cavity, he retrieved the leather coinpurse and secured it in another pocket. Upon hefting the laden rucksack onto his shoulders, he staggered forward, surprised by the weight. It would take time to grow accustomed to the heavy load. He crept his way back to the exit, but then glanced back to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything else.

Dad's compass.

Scurrying to where his bedside table once was, he fell to his knees, blindly scraping his hands against the floor. His fingers brushed against the familiar form and he clutched the compass gratefully. Slipping the chain over his head and tucking the compass inside his shirt, he stood dumbfounded at the realisation he'd nearly left it behind. There was so much more he wanted to take, but circumstance had forced his hand. They were just things, after all. Anything important was on his person now, but he couldn't help acknowledging the fact he was leaving his world behind.

He returned to find Eleanor keeping an eye out toward the street.

"Did you get the pass?" she asked.

Forlorn emotions were hitting Callum hard, and not wanting to test his voice, he only nodded in reply. She took the lead, once again guiding him through shortcuts and deserted passageways. They headed south toward the city walls, and Callum pondered how they'd pass through the portcullises, which would be closed this time of night. However, rather than heading toward the gates, she stole her way along the towering walls in the opposite direction. The path descended and a trench along the wall emerged.

"Where are we going?" Callum whispered.

Eleanor pointed ahead to an unexpected gap in the wall. "Rainfall gathers here. Rather than risk flooding, they've created a tunnel for water to escape."

Crouching down to peer into the gap, the moonlit countryside on the other side beckoned them. There was only one problem. Their way was restricted by thick iron bars. When he pointed that out, Eleanor reached in and gave the bars a hard jostle. A hidden catch dislodged, and they swung out.

Callum looked on incredulously. "How?"

"It wasn't always like that," she said with a laugh. "We had a

metalworker create a replacement that appeared identical to the original bars. It's been there for years. We didn't expect it to last this long, but no one's ever discovered it."

He suppressed a chuckle. "Amazing."

"Isn't it?" She gestured toward the exit. "After you."

The tunnel was a tight fit, and he had to wriggle on his belly while pushing his bulging rucksack on ahead. Once she made her own way through, she closed the gate, followed by a good kick to latch it shut.

Callum glanced up at the looming city walls. Maybe one day he could return, but that felt like a delusion. The reality of his situation meant this would likely be the last time he'd step foot in Anbera. The bitter farewell to his mother would be his last, and without a doubt, that would haunt him forever.

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"Did you get everything you wanted at your apartment?" Eleanor asked once the city walls were at their backs in the distance. As a precautionary measure, they kept to the open fields, away from the road.

"Yeah, luckily," Callum replied. "Who do you think broke into my place?"

She gave him a conspicuous glare, as though it were obvious. "They're not idiots. They know about those pactrid passes. You made it back, which means you were given one. In the wrong hands, they can do serious damage. Spies can make it beyond the lines and cause havoc."

"That happens?"

"Of course." She scoffed with a shake of the head. "You're really clueless, you know that?"

Callum balled up his fists. "Cut me some slack, alright? A tenday ago I was a simple medic—just trying to keep my head down, serve my conscription time, stay alive. I had no clue *we* were the bad guys."

She raised a hand in apology. "You're not a bad guy, Hidaro. The pactrids proved that. But come on, try to keep up. Put two and two together, okay?"

“I’m just . . . finding it difficult to believe the high ranks are in complete denial, unaware of the facts, or worse, willing to let people die just to keep the war going.”

“Nobody knows what’s going on with the higher-ups, but like I said, they’re not fools. I think all they care about is the wood. Anberan and pactrid lives aren’t worth as much.”

Callum shook his head in bewilderment. “How did it come to this?”

Unable to answer, Eleanor remained silent. Or maybe she tired of the subject. Callum decided to change tack.

“I considered changing into my own clothes back at the apartment, but figured wearing black was better.” He gestured to the garments he wore. “Thanks for letting me borrow these. I’ll change when we reach the village.”

She waved away his concern. “Deem it a welcoming gift as a new rebel.” Her eyes glanced up and down at him, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “Anyway, you wear it well.”

He ignored her attempt at flirting, but couldn’t stop his cheeks from warming. Luckily, the moonlight hid that. “I never agreed to being a rebel, though. Don’t get me wrong, I’m thankful you got me out of there. But I’m not comfortable with the idea of fighting our own kind. I don’t want to fight anybody.”

“Nobody said you’d be battling Anberans. But if you’re not fighting *with* them, you’re seen as a rebel—simple as that.” She sensed her words weren’t helping to allay his concern. “Don’t worry, Hidaro. ‘Rebel’ is just a word to describe us as a whole. It doesn’t define us. Many are pacifists like you, and there’s nothing wrong with that. You can do anything you want. You’re not beholden to anyone, okay?”

Callum frowned, unbelieving. “I can do whatever I want?”

“It’s a weird concept, yeah? We were taught to follow orders our whole lives. I’ll admit it took me a while to get used to it, too.”

The idea of making his own way alone frightened him. More than ever, he wanted Rym by his side. But there was no telling where his friend was now. How would they find each other? Rym was confident the message he gave Callum would be enough to reunite them, but how would that message reach him?

An hour into their trek through farmer’s fields, they came upon a homely village made up of a smattering of cottages. Large barns—likely filled with grains and vegetables to feed the city—flanked the

edge of the field. They'd already skirted around numerous other villages, but in this case, Eleanor headed directly toward this one.

"The retired transporter lives here?" Callum asked.

Eleanor grunted in assent.

"But it's the middle of the night."

"So we'll interrupt his beauty sleep. We need to get you away while it's still dark. His transport memory is old—when the front lines were further north. You'll have to hike south, sneak between two garrison camps, and get into the forest before sunup. And in case you weren't aware, there're sentries walking the line between camps."

"I knew that much."

"Just making sure, Hidaro," she said with a smirk. "It's another reason I want you to keep that outfit. Easier to stay hidden in the dark."

"Any idea how far south I need to go before reaching those camps?"

Eleanor shrugged. "Sorry, can't say for sure. They're always pushing the pactrids south and moving the camps. Probably at least a few kilometres."

"I guess I'll see how I manage jogging with this heavy rucksack on my back."

"That's the spirit."

Reaching the village proper, it was unsurprisingly silent. No candles or lamplight glowed from the windows. They approached a cottage, and Eleanor gave it a light knock with a distinct and precise cadence. Callum assumed it was a rebel thing, but given how quiet the knock was, he didn't expect anyone sleeping inside would notice it. They waited, and he was about to suggest trying again when shuffling footsteps came from the other side.

"Who is it?" a man's voice asked, rough and gravelly.

"Eleanor."

There was a gentle scrape of metal on metal—a bolt lock—and the door opened to reveal a candlelit man. White hair, unkempt and wild, told them without a doubt he'd been fast asleep a minute earlier. He stood barefoot, wearing simple nightclothes. His wrinkled face drew long shadows in the pale light, stretching as his kindly smile grew.

"Always a pleasure, m'lady."

"Don't call me that," she said while pushing him aside in a

good-natured manner. Her hand caught Callum's arm and pulled him inside. "Allan, I'd like you to meet Hidaro, our newest member."

Callum reached out to shake the old man's hand, which was returned in kind. "You can call me Callum."

Eleanor smiled. "I never thought to ask your first name. Anyway, I like Hidaro better." She turned to Allan. "He passed the pactrid test, but the higher-ups know about him. I had to free him from gaol."

Allan gave Callum an empathetic look, then gestured to follow. "Come on, then. We'll get you to the line."

Callum let out a short, anxious breath while the two led him into the cottage. Everything was happening too fast, and his lack of control over the situation had a twisting knot growing in his stomach again. In a way, this was no better than being tied to a rope leash. "Are you sure there's no way I can stay and help?"

Glancing back, Eleanor witnessed the panic etched across his face. "Listen, I get it. You didn't ask for any of this, but what's done is done. Trust me when I say being stuck in hiding is no fun. I've seen others in your situation, and despite their best efforts, they were found. Living on the other side isn't bad. It's a"—she paused to find the right word—"simpler way of life, but it's better than the alternative."

Her words produced no salve to his worries, but Callum realised he was acting like a frightened child. These people were trying to help him, and he was wasting their time with pointless questions. "I'm sorry. It's just a lot to take in all at once."

Eleanor drew near and offered him a consoling pat on the arm. "Once you get to a rebel village, they'll set you up with a bed and a roof over your head. They have a whole system for newcomers. Try not to worry, okay?"

Callum nodded in reply, then gestured for Allan to continue leading them. The old man brought them into an empty room where a shallow crater had been dug into the floor. Eyeing the distance between floor and ceiling, Callum recognised it as the size used for transport.

"Jump down," Allan said.

"Wait, I almost forgot," Callum said, doffing his rucksack and handing the leather bag of coins to Eleanor.

"Thanks, Hidaro. I'll make sure this gets put to good use."

They shook hands, then he stepped down into the crater.

"Thanks again, both of you."

"Good luck," she replied.

Allan waited until Callum stood in the centre. "Away we go." He closed his eyes and the yellow barrier rose up.

Then it disappeared. Callum blinked in confusion. He was standing in the middle of an empty field of long grass. He'd never witnessed such a rapid transport before—unable to comprehend how it was even possible.

Trying to orient himself, he spun in place, but aside from the bright moon overhead, there were no markers or distinctive features on the landscape. Tugging at the chain around his neck, he pulled the compass free and held it out flat, north pointing at the tips of his fingers. As before, he turned himself until the needle aligned itself to the southwest. But something was wrong. The moon—which had passed its apex and was making its plodding descent to the south—didn't line up with his compass. Instead, the needle pointed more westward. Callum frowned in disappointment. *I guess it really must be damaged. Damn!*

He chided himself for wasting time. The moon served as an adequate enough guide, so he tucked the compass back under his shirt and headed south. As he progressed, signs of previous camps became more apparent. Wood stumps impeded his path. At first, they were old and rotten, but they became fresher, more recently cut the farther he travelled. By the time he caught sight of a distant garrison camp, the eastern sky emanated a deep blue. He estimated there was another hour—though probably less than that—before the sun would breach the horizon.

Veering to the left, he aimed for the empty field between the camps. Telltale lamplights—two of them—floated in the distance, travelling the distance between each garrison. Sentries.

Not wanting to waste any more time, he jogged ahead to reach the outskirts of the patrol zone, then crouched beside one of the many tree stumps. There he waited, watching a sentry pass by. But when the way appeared clear, he held his position. This was where a pactrid could get caught if they didn't know better. Callum knew these sentries were decoys. There were at least two other vigilant men patrolling the spaces between the lights.

Callum waited nervously, and it didn't take long for his patience to be rewarded. The crunch of boots approached in the

dark—it was a hidden sentry. He ducked his head, sticking close to the stump, allowing the sentry to pass by, clueless to Callum's presence. To his shock, however, the footfalls drew near instead of moving on. He flattened down onto his belly, desperately holding a hand over his mouth to control the rising panic.

He couldn't get caught. Not now. Not when he was this close. They'd search his rucksack. They'd find the pactrid pass, and worse, Rym's message. He wouldn't get locked up for that—he'd be executed.

With his free hand, he reached for his knife that wasn't there. He slammed his eyes shut in realisation it was in his rucksack. The footsteps stopped. The man was standing opposite Callum's position. *Should I run for it?*

In answer to his question, he heard the clink of a belt buckle and rustling of fabric, followed by a relieved sigh and the sound of urine splashing against the stump. A sliver of hope was all that kept Callum from running for the trees. He considered it, given the soldier wouldn't be able to immediately give chase. But the soldier's hollers would alert the others.

No. Running wasn't the rational choice, in spite of his mind screaming at him to do it regardless.

Either the soldier had a full bladder, or Callum's perception of time had decelerated to a crawl. The flow of urine wouldn't let up. Had his life not been hanging in the balance, Callum would've reckoned this was hilarious.

Finally, the stream ebbed and stopped. The soldier adjusted his trousers, then continued on his patrol, completely oblivious to Callum's proximity. Even once the footsteps fell away, Callum held frozen lying on his belly—in shock at how close he'd been to losing everything. Gathering his wits, he risked peeking up to survey the way south toward the treeline. The second, advancing lamp-lit soldier was still a way off, however the likelihood of another hidden sentry was possible. Callum cupped a hand to his ear, listening for any sign of approach.

Nothing.

He bolted—risking speed over stealth, dodging tree stumps that emerged from the dark in front of him. Ragged gasps and the pulse racing in his ears deafened him to the world. He didn't care now. If someone heard him, Callum would have enough of a head start to reach the forest. His foot hit something—a root, perhaps—

throwing him off balance. Flailing arms did nothing to correct his trajectory, and he tumbled face first to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Short of breath, he flipped onto his back—the overstuffed rucksack fighting him—then scanned for pursuers. If anyone was following him, there was no sign of them. The two sentries holding lamps hadn't strayed from their patrol path, either.

A series of distant thunking sounds arose from the direction of the forest, but Callum's attention was firmly held on his burning lungs. No amount of breath could sate them. He rose onto unsteady legs, managing to keep his footing as he continued south. Spiky treetops stood out against the backdrop of the predawn sky. His liberation was so close now.

A succession of sharp cracks, followed by a crash, had Callum crouch beside a stump again. Lumberjacks were at work. That meant more soldiers, acting as guards, would be in the vicinity. He swore between bared teeth. In the dim light, the men blended seamlessly against the dark forest, making it impossible to spot their location. Then a worse consideration came to mind. The felling of trees would bring out the pactrids. This was the last place Callum wanted to be.

Dawn was nearly upon him. Moving again, he shifted his direction diagonally—trying to discern a safe path between the garrison camp at his rear and the lumber crew ahead of him. He had to get to those trees before someone spotted him. An indistinct voice rose from the hubbub of the crew, forcing Callum to duck against a stump yet again. But the voice wasn't meant for him. It was only a word of warning as another tree fell. In his hyper-alert state, every little thing had him jump for cover, but this was only wasting time. He couldn't afford to squander it any longer.

The eastern sky took on a warm hue. Callum's way ahead was completely visible now, which meant if anyone glanced in his direction, they'd likely see him. His only advantage was the dark clothing he wore, and he silently thanked Eleanor for allowing him to keep them. From his low position, he visualised a path to the treeline. *No more distractions. Just run.*

He did. Once again, any pretence of stealth was abandoned. His eyes remained locked to the goal, and with every passing moment, the treeline grew larger. A voice called out again—another warning? He ignored it, but soon a chorus of yells joined in. Callum

peered back toward the lumber crew, and the fear of being seen—that dread hounding him the entire time—had finally come true.

With swords in hand, soldiers charged toward him while confused lumberjacks looked on. That threat only aided in priming the blood rushing through Callum's veins. He bounded heedlessly, one foot in front of the next at a blinding pace. The yells grew in intensity, closing in on his position, but he didn't dare look back now. Either he would escape, or they'd have to tackle him. He wouldn't stop for anything.

The treeline came at an alarming rate, forcing him to trace a path beyond that wouldn't hinder his progress. Tree boughs above held back what paltry sunlight was available, making the pathfinding task that much more difficult.

Callum crashed through underbrush and leapt over a nearly imperceptible network of roots. The troopers' voices, strained with ire and rage, kept at his heels. Callum still refused to look back. His vision narrowed and sharpened, every step sure and calculated. Instinct had taken over. Not wanting to break the momentum, he willingly allowed his unconscious mind to take control. Doubt and concern evaporated. It was as though he was watching another's movements through their eyes—someone with skills he'd never learnt or mastered.

The voices echoed amidst the trees—growing more distant, fewer in number. Still, Callum didn't stop. He refused to be captured. Running headlong through bracken and vaulting over a fallen log, he discovered—too late—that the ground under his feet had ended. An escarpment appeared out of nowhere, and with no way to stop his forward momentum, he tumbled head over heels down a steep slope. It was a brief trip before slamming into a tree.

Dazed and out of breath, Callum reached out clumsily in an attempt to right himself. His hand bumped against the tree, but it didn't feel like bark. It felt like leather. Pulling back the baggy hood that had fallen over his eyes, he glanced up to behold a massive pactrid looming over him—bewilderment written on his face. Using that confusion to his advantage, Callum scrambled away on his hands and knees, trying to create as much space as possible between them. That's when he saw five more in the group.

The pactrid he'd bumped into pulled a blade free from his scabbard, rushing to close the space Callum fought to keep. Callum cringed and looked away, holding out his hands in futile defence.

“Don’t attack!” he pleaded in their language. “I’m an ally.”

The trampling footfalls stopped short, and Callum dared to look up. The pactrid loomed over him with an aggressive stance, sword held at the ready. His fellows, weapons drawn, stood at his flanks. Three of them wore full suits of heavy scale armour. No doubt this squad was preparing to attack the lumberjacks.

“You speak our language?” This question hailed from another pactrid. Judging by his demeanour, Callum assumed he was the leader.

“Yes.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m running from my own kind.”

The leader glowered. “Why?”

“They found out I’m a friend of the pactrids.” The group chuckled at the statement. “I’m serious,” Callum cried. “I was told I could seek refuge with other humans.”

The leader wore a grave expression. “You must be proven worthy. Few humans pass the test and live.”

“Yes, yes, I know. I met a *gotachi*.” Callum pantomimed hands touching and the pactrids watched with scepticism. “She gave me . . . here, let me show you.”

Still lying on the ground, he wrestled the rucksack off his back. This brought on another round of aggressive scowls and raised weapons. Callum dug a hand into the deep recesses of the sack, its contents spilling onto the forest floor. He found the silver token and the parchment, pulling it free. The silver pass in his hand eased their hostile posturing, and the leader reached out to examine it.

“I don’t understand,” the leader said. “If you were given a pass, why didn’t you travel to the refugee villages immediately? Why are you coming from the front line?”

The leader’s confusion mirrored Rym’s own when Callum stated he wanted to return home. Callum had erringly assumed all would be fine. How wrong he was.

“I made a mistake,” Callum said. “The pactrid who brought me back tried to explain it, but I didn’t listen.” He handed over the parchment. “His name is Rym.” It was then Callum realised he couldn’t recall Rym’s proper name.

The leader glanced up from the parchment, bewildered. “Rymolnd Tepin?”

Surprised, the five other pactrids huddled close, trying to glean

a view of the message.

"Yes?" Callum replied with apprehension.

"Scoutmaster Rymolnd Tepin was your escort?"

Callum nodded nervously.

"It states that he's to be immediately notified upon your return. Why is that?"

"I . . . I don't—"

The leader turned to the pactrid Callum had bumped into on his flight over the edge of the ridge. "Ettor, you escort this human to the nearest village."

Ettor's trunk rose, letting loose a trumpeting call of outrage. "Why me?"

"Watch your tone, trooper. The human chose you when he arrived."

The leader's facetious sense of humour was lost on Ettor. "He didn't choose me. That was an accident. We don't have time for this!"

Callum raised his hands in alarm. "Please, I don't mean to cause any trouble. Just point me in the right direction and I'll find my way."

The leader handed back the pass and Rym's message. "I cannot allow that. Ally or not, no human can travel without an escort. That scoutmaster Tepin requests your presence is all the more reason you need to arrive safely."

"But how will he find me?" Callum asked, waving the parchment. "Aren't you supposed to send this message?"

The leader shook his head curtly. "I can't spare another man to be your courier. You'll need to deliver that message to an emissary. They visit the refugee villages."

Ettor glared at Callum and pointed at his rucksack. "Gather your things, human. Let's get this over with."

Callum rushed to pick up his scattered belongings, taking with it twigs and dead leaves in his haste. The trooper was already leaving without him.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," Callum said to the leader and remaining squad. "Thank you for your help."

The leader offered a nod in farewell. "Safe travels, human."

Callum shouldered the heavy rucksack and ran after Ettor, who was wasting no time to complete his task. Despite his lumbering gait, the pactrid was quick.

“I’m really sorry, Ettor,” Callum said once he managed to get alongside him.

The trooper snorted his displeasure. In many ways, this felt identical to Callum’s initial meeting with Rym. At least he wasn’t tied to a leash. Hopefully, Ettor’s sour mood would diminish over the course of the day. For now, though, he knew it best to remain silent and keep his attention on the narrow footpath before them.

The silence allowed Callum to acknowledge the scent of the forest. It’d been there the entire time, trying to catch his attention. Only after leaving this place did he realise how much he yearned to return. Such a rich and diverse palette of aromas. The freshness of recent growth amid the sweet, musky decay of fallen leaves.

It reminded him of Rym.

SIX

Brookside

Ettor proved to be a harsh and unforgiving travel companion. They pushed hard, stopping only to gather fresh water from a stream. Despite the trooper's malcontent, he imparted a portion of his rations to Callum upon discovering he had nothing to eat. Callum bashfully accepted it, feeling foolish for so poorly planning his escape from Anbera. With everything that had transpired in the past twenty-four hours, packing food hadn't crossed his mind.

"We'll stop here for the night," Ettor announced as sundown approached, pointing at a small clearing off the path they were travelling.

Callum looked up at the pactrid in surprise. Ettor had remained nearly mute the entire day—only speaking a handful of words after leaving his squad that morning. Though they had marched for over twelve hours, the pactrid had given no impression he was tired. If it'd been safe enough, he might've continued all night. In contrast, Callum was soaked in sweat. He doffed his rucksack and slumped to the ground, rubbing his sore shoulders. His respite was short-lived, however. Ettor gestured abruptly for Callum to stand up.

“I’m not your servant. Help me gather wood for a fire.”

Callum let out a curt breath. With a pained grunt, he rose to his feet to oblige his taskmaster. This brought a smirk to Ettor’s face, but his eyes spoke differently. It seemed Ettor was testing him, yet despite Callum’s fatigue, perhaps he was meeting the pactrid’s expectations. Between the two of them, they garnered a bounty of sticks, dead branches, and more than enough dry underbrush to use as kindling.

“You rest,” Ettor said while he built a fire.

Callum nearly collapsed, leaning against his rucksack. “Thank you, Ettor.”

The pactrid huffed through his trunk in reply. Callum wanted to apologise again, but he’d learnt in their brief time together that angered Ettor rather than appeased him. He casually studied his escort while he worked. Like the soldiers at the outpost, Ettor was young compared to Rym. His stamina alone endorsed that fact, but his physique attested to his age as well. Muscles bulged as he snapped thick branches in two—enormous arms restrained by tight shirt sleeves. Feeling Callum’s eyes upon him, Ettor glanced over from his work with a furrowed brow. Callum averted his gaze stiffly, but was unable to hide his warming cheeks.

“What’s your name, human?”

He couldn’t bring himself to look up. “Callum.”

“Cal . . . oom.”

Callum chuckled, in spite of his attempt to stifle it.

“Why do you laugh?”

“Rym can’t pronounce my name, either.”

Ettor tried again but couldn’t enunciate it properly. This irritated him.

“It’s nothing to be angry about,” Callum said. “Your language doesn’t use that kind of sound. Call me Cal’oom. It's close enough.”

“But I don’t understand why I can’t move my mouth that way.”

“I appreciate you trying, but it’s not important.”

While Ettor finished building the fire and lit it, he continued his attempts at repeating Callum’s name, but ended up no closer to perfecting the pronunciation. He growled in annoyance.

“You speak our language well, Cal’oom. How did you learn?”

Callum cringed inwardly. *That question again.* “I was taught by instructors, but how they gained that knowledge? I don’t know.” At least he wasn’t lying.

Ettor gave a venerate nod. “You honour us. I wish more humans were like you.”

“I do, too,” Callum replied, nudging himself closer to the fire. “I only just discovered the truth of the war.”

“What truth?”

Callum took a deep breath. “We’ve always believed pactrids have been invading our land, and that we need to fight back in order to keep it.”

Ettor stared back in disbelief, his eyes wide. “But the opposite is true.”

“Yes. I know that now.”

“But how can your kind believe this? Who spreads these lies?”

Callum cast his gaze down in shame, shaking his head. “I told someone high in our ranks and he didn’t believe me. Perhaps he knew and hid it well. But now, I wonder if this story has been repeated so many times—and for so long—that it’s become the truth.”

The pactrid stared into the fire, its flames reflecting in his eyes. “I hate humans,” he muttered.

Despite being taken aback by the brash statement, Callum couldn’t blame Ettor. The more he learnt, the more he agreed with him. It seemed like everything he’d been told was a lie, or a disfigurement of the truth—twisted and pulled to benefit those in power. For the first time, he was glad Anbera was behind him now —preferring the company of this surly trooper who made no attempt to hide anything.

Their travel together lasted another three gruelling days. During that time, Ettor’s prickly manner had abated. Although Callum couldn’t be sure, he assumed travelling with a human had been an eye-opening experience for the pactrid. Ettor’s hate was based on generalisations, and being in close contact with a human showed that in some ways, they weren’t all that different.

On the last day, rather than stop before dusk, Ettor laid a weighty hand on Callum’s arm—ostensibly trying to share his strength.

“The village is close. If we hurry, we’ll arrive before the light is gone.”

Stinking from days of sweat, Callum had long fallen past the point of exhaustion. His shoulders were bruised from the straps of his heavy rucksack, and his feet ached terribly. These felt like minor

complaints, though. During their trek, Ettor frequently expressed concern for his squadmates. He belonged with them, to fight alongside and protect them. To Callum, his pain was inconsequential compared to Ettor's worry.

The pactrid's expeditious course of action was to deliver Callum today, rest for the night, then return to his squad at first light. At this point, whatever damage to Callum's body was already done.

He wore a weary smile. "Lead on, my tireless friend."

The pactrid exclaimed his appreciation with a brief trumpeting from his trunk. Callum flinched at the sound, but then let out his own fatigued whoop in solidarity.

While Ettor's demeanour toward Callum had grown affable over the course of their journey, the pactrid never apologised for his harsh statement that first night. A part of Callum didn't want to hear it, though. That Ettor appeared to enjoy his company told Callum not to take it personally. Twice now, Callum had managed to befriend what many could consider his enemy. Was that a personal victory worth celebrating, or did it show pactrids weren't permanently blinded by hate? Callum decided the latter was more important. Anberans could learn so much from them.

The sun had fallen below the skyline when the forest gave way to a humble village. Two rows of houses faced each other with a proud longhouse in between. The height of the buildings proclaimed who lived there—Anberans. Flickering lamplight glowed invitingly in many of the windows. A granary stood in the distance, and beyond were plots of farmland. Drawn in by the welcoming atmosphere, Callum advanced into the village proper, but then realised Ettor wasn't following. Instead, the pactrid regarded the settlement from afar with apprehension.

"What's wrong?" Callum asked, closing the space between them.

Ettor gazed down at him, his lips tight. He wanted to say something.

"Tell me, Ettor. What's wrong?"

"Humans, Cal'oom."

"But I'm human."

Ettor shook his head, his trunk weaving back and forth. "They're not you."

"Yes, these humans are like me," Callum said, gesturing to the

village. “They passed the *gotachi* test. They don’t have hate in their heart. They know the truth.”

Ettor crouched down to one knee and held a hand to Callum’s chest. “I hope you fare well here with your fellow humans, Cal’oom.”

This mimicked Rym’s conduct when they’d parted ways. Perhaps this is how pactrids said goodbye. Callum followed by example—his hand dwarfed against the pactrid’s chest.

“Thank you, Ettor. I know this was a hardship for you, but please understand, I greatly appreciate what you’ve done for me.”

The pactrid smiled.

“I hope you and your squadmates stay safe,” Callum added.

“As safe as we can be.”

“Your kind are terrifying on the battlefield, a force to be reckoned with. I’m glad to be your ally and not your enemy.”

Ettor’s smile widened. “Yes, you wouldn’t last a moment in combat with me.”

Callum scoffed at the idea. “You’re right. I’d be running for my life.”

The pactrid let out a hearty laugh.

“But please, don’t leave yet,” Callum said. “Maybe they have some food they can share.”

“No. I wish to return to my squad.”

“You’re not going to rest the night?”

Ettor stood, breaking the connection of their hands on their chests. “Perhaps later, if I tire.”

“Then journey safe, Ettor.”

The pactrid gave him a bow of the head, then left without another word. Callum watched him lumber away, disappearing into the darkened forest. More than ever, he longed for Rym. Ettor’s touch had rekindled a yearning deep inside, and to have it pulled away so hastily bolstered the loneliness dwelling within.

Callum turned to face the village again. Despite the night still being young, it was quiet—nothing like Anbera’s rambunctious nature most evenings. *Is this place really my new home?* Being dropped off rather unceremoniously—without any clue of whom to speak to—left him feeling timid. There were so many possibilities, so many uncertainties in his life now. But instead of fear, he felt strangely invigorated by the challenges to come.

His first choice would’ve been to visit the longhouse, but it lay

dormant. With no other ideas, he stepped up to the nearest house. Lit windows and hushed conversation—punctuated by the laughter of children—told him somebody was home. He knocked on the door and took a few steps back. A man answered, perhaps a few years older than him. The smile on his face, however, melted away upon seeing Callum. In its place, there was a mix of confusion and suspicion.

"Hello," the man said hesitantly.

Callum raised a nervous hand in greeting. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to startle you. My name's Callum. A pactrid just dropped me off here. I've no idea who to speak to."

The man's eyes softened. "Oh, a new arrival?"

Callum nodded.

"The person you want is Delores. She handles newcomers. Let me get my boots and cloak, and I'll introduce you."

"I appreciate that. Thanks so much, um . . ."

The man held out a hand and Callum shook it. "I'm Arnold, but everyone calls me Arn."

Arn led him deeper into the village. Beyond the longhouse lay a wide, grassy avenue, flanked by more houses—over a dozen on each side. The open space was likely used for gatherings or celebrations. A roofed stone well stood in the centre. Larger buildings—perhaps storehouses and workshops—sat far in the distance, hugged by tall, looming trees.

"Regardless of what Delores might say, she's our village chief. She hates the title, but more than qualifies to fill the position. People look up to her, and rightly so. She played a big part in the founding of our village."

They approached an unassuming house, and Arn knocked on the door. A stocky woman answered. She had long hair—greying in places—tied into a ponytail. Arn introduced them, repeating what Callum had told him.

Delores smiled warmly in greeting. "Where's your escort?"

"Oh, umm"—Callum didn't know how to politely explain that the pactrid didn't trust them—"he left already. He's a soldier and wanted to get back to his squad. Honestly, my escape was kind of a mess. I'd been caught crossing the front line, and our soldiers were chasing me into the forest."

"Escape is rarely easy," Delores said, "but that's behind you now. Welcome to Brookside."

Callum nodded his thanks to Delores and Arn. “I’ll admit, I don’t know how any of this works.”

“Were you not counselled?” Delores asked with a frown. “Normally there’s an orientation period to bring new arrivals up to speed.”

Callum told of his return to Anbera, his meeting with the colonel, and his short incarceration before being freed by Eleanor. As the story unfolded, Arn regarded him with wide eyes—captivated. In hindsight, the events did sound astonishing.

“You must be tired,” Arn said after Callum completed his story.

Callum chuckled. “You have no idea.”

Delores gestured for him to enter her home. “I have a spare room meant for new arrivals. Come. Let’s get you settled and into bed.”

Arn used that as a signal to take his leave. “Goodnight, Callum. Perhaps you can tell me another adventure tomorrow?”

“I’m afraid that’s my only story worth telling. Thanks again, Arn. Goodnight.”

Callum entered the cosy home, finding a common area furnished with beautifully carved wooden chairs and a table. Dried flowers and herbs—fashioned into wreaths—hung from the wall. A low fire glowed in the stove, warding off the growing chill of the evening. Two doors led to bedrooms.

“Delores, could I trouble you for a washbasin and cloth? I’ve been on the march for three days and desperately need to get this grime off me.”

She smiled. “I can do you one better. This village is called Brookside for a reason.”

With a lantern and towel in hand, Delores led him beyond the backyard of her home into the forest. A well-kept path brought them to a wide brook, its water gently rolling over round stones.

“It’s deep enough to sit and bathe in. We also use it for laundry.” She set the lantern and towel on a nearby rock. “Take your time. When you’re done, let yourself in. I’ll have your bed prepared.”

A place to bathe and a bed to sleep on should’ve felt like basic necessities, but at this moment, Callum’s heart was filled with gratitude. “Thank you, Delores. You can’t understand what this means to me.”

“Perhaps I can,” she said with a wink, and then left to give him

privacy.

In Anbera, a trip to the bathhouse took well over fifteen minutes. It felt like a luxury to have a bathing spot nearby. Once undressed, Callum tentatively dipped a throbbing foot into the water. He sucked in air through his teeth. The water was frigid. *One benefit of the bathhouse, I guess.*

Before he could regret it, he dived into the water. Initially, it was agonising, but as his body adjusted to the temperature, it soothed his aching muscles. He lay back, staring at the black canopy above. The moon had completed its tenday journey across the sky, allowing twinkling stars to greet him through gaps in the boughs. This place felt like a dream. Almost too good to be true. The hubbub of the city replaced by the rush of water over stone and a chorus of night insects. Without experiencing it until now, he had no idea how special it was.

Water sluiced over him, stripping the sweat and road dust from his skin. The brook's current was surprisingly strong. Without his feet braced against the stones, he would've easily floated away. A part of him wanted to let go, to discover where it'd take him. But no, beyond the village was unfamiliar territory. Perhaps it led to dangerous rapids. Regardless, this land brought on a growing wanderlust he'd never possessed before. Excitement for the unexplored.

Rym was a scout—a scout*master*, as revealed by the squad leader. Callum wondered what that entailed. Perhaps Rym could teach him to be a scout, and they could explore the unknown together.

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The soothing patter of rain—unobtrusive in its manner—gently pulled Callum from his slumber. Soft, grey light edged its way between a gap in the curtains, lighting the sparse bedroom. Unlike Delores' front room, the walls here were unadorned, and aside from a small table by the bed and set of drawers, the space was empty. She'd mentioned these were temporary quarters for new arrivals. Perhaps she considered it best not to personalise the room.

Rising from bed with a groan—his legs ached furiously—

Callum peeked out the window. Beads of rainwater marred the glass, warping his view of the neighbouring house. Leaning over to peer at the grassy avenue, he saw no one. Perhaps it was still early, or more likely, the rain was keeping people indoors.

He dressed, then opened the door to the front room. A newly-lit fire crackled in the stove, working wonders to dispel the damp air. Delores sat at the table, sipping from a steaming mug. She glanced over and offered Callum a warm smile.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

Callum nodded. "The bed was a nice change. I'm not accustomed to sleeping outdoors, nor long marches. The soldier who escorted me here was—shall we say—efficient. He didn't leave any time for recuperation."

She gestured for Callum to join her. "I'm guessing you're not infantry?" she asked with a sly smile.

"What gave you that idea?" he asked, chuckling at her sarcasm while sitting at the table. "You're right. I'm a medic, but I also briefly acted as an interpreter."

Her eyes lit up. "You speak the pactrid language? Why was your tenure so short?"

He broke his gaze from Delores, trying to keep the images burnt in his mind at bay. "I didn't appreciate what being an interpreter entailed. I knew about the violence—thought I had the stomach for it." He looked back into her eyes. "I learnt a lot about myself that day."

She gave a sympathetic nod. "Are you still fluent?"

"Yeah."

"So, an interpreter *and* a medic? You'll be a great boon to Brookside."

Callum felt his cheeks redden. "I don't know about that."

"Visiting pactrid traders don't speak our language particularly well. Broken sentences at best, making it difficult to barter sometimes."

"Oh, well, I'd be happy to translate."

"We have a doctor—his name is Gerald. I'm sure he'd appreciate a medic to help him."

"Of course. I'm happy to do whatever. I'll admit, while travelling here, I couldn't envision what I would do, or even how to make a living amongst the pactrids."

"It's similar to how we did things in Anbera. Sometimes we

barter in trade, other times in coin. We use the pactrid's currency with traders and between ourselves in the village. Everyone plays a role to better the lives of our neighbours. Our community is small enough to make it work."

"And you have room for me?"

Delores smiled. "Yes. We juggle people around to make it work. Some houses hold a single family with children. In the case of single folk, they share a house—two or three at the most. Of course, relationships between our neighbours occur. If they wish to live together, we figure out a solution. No one house belongs to anyone. They belong to everyone."

Callum found this concept a little strange, though his concern could be a moot point. It was possible he wouldn't be staying.

"I'm sorry—I'm a terrible host," she said. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

Callum nodded. "Both. And no, you've been a wonderful host. Taking me in. Answering my questions. I feel incredibly welcome here."

"It's my pleasure. Would you like tea? And I have warm biscuits with butter."

Callum's belly rumbled. "Oh, that sounds really good right now."

She offered another comforting smile, then swiftly laid out his breakfast. Mouth watering, Callum prepared one biscuit and took a bite. Crunchy on the outside, soft within. It practically melted in his mouth. He let out a moan of approval, which brought a laugh to Delores' lips.

After finishing the biscuit and enjoying a sip of hot tea, he said, "I have a message I need sent out. I was told emissaries visit human villages."

"Yes, they do. What message?"

Callum's cheeks flushed again. "The pactrid scout I mentioned yesterday? He said to seek him out if I ever returned. We . . . um, became friends." He left it vague and hoped she wouldn't pry.

"I suppose when you can speak their language, it's easier to befriend them."

A nervous laugh escaped his lips.

"Emissary visits are irregular," she said, "but I'll make sure you're told when they arrive so you can deliver this message."

"And what about travelling beyond the village? I was told we

always need a pactrid escort. Are we . . . trapped here?"

She made a face, telling him he wasn't entirely wrong. "The alliance we have with the pactrids is tenuous. They don't all agree Anberans should be living on their land."

"I'll admit, given everything I've learnt, I'm surprised they allow us on their land at all."

She nodded. "The impartial way they view their aggressors is quite foreign compared to how we were brought up. Away from the front line fighting, most don't immediately befall prejudiced thoughts. Instead, they discover the merits of each Anberan and treat them accordingly."

"You're talking about the *gotachi*?"

"Yes. Their ability to see a person's motives—hidden or not—is fascinating. And that's why there are no walls surrounding our village, no pactrid guards keeping us in. They trust us. In turn, they ask us to follow their rules. That we can't travel without an escort is partially for our own protection as well. As I said, they know some pactrids distrust humans, even if we've proven themselves to be allies."

"I'll admit, once I learnt the truth, I felt ashamed."

"I think it'd be fair to say we all did."

"But Eleanor said we help supply the pactrids—arm them—essentially helping them fight our own kind. That feels . . . wrong, traitorous."

"The simple fact is that Anberans are the enemy. They're the oppressors. I understand it's hard to come to terms with. You've been told the opposite your entire life."

"But—"

"Callum, if our kind had respected the pactrids and their land, this war would've never started. That they—despite everything—accept people like us to live here shows they'd be friends to all Anberans had we never stolen from them. The idea of humans and pactrids living together in harmony cheers my heart, but that'll never happen until the truth is told. Not just told, but *believed* by the citizens of Anbera."

Callum's thoughts returned to his mother, who refused to believe what he'd told her. If she couldn't believe her own son, who could possibly change her mind? "So, how do we get them to believe us?"

Delores stared back, her eyes creased in sorrow. "If we knew

the answer, we'd have done it." She stood and nudged a curtain aside to peek outside. "All we can do is be thankful for the pactrids —who allow us to live amongst them, away from all the lies and hate of Anbera." She turned back to him, a smile winning against a frown. "The rain's stopped. Finish your tea, and I'll introduce you to some of your new neighbours."

• • •

Life in Brookside required time for Callum to adjust. Everyone's pace was unhurried, and if a chore wasn't completed by sundown, the general consensus was 'there's always tomorrow.' That's not to say nothing was ever completed, though. Despite the relaxed atmosphere, duties and responsibilities were never neglected.

At first, Callum grappled with the perception of himself as a hindrance. While the doctor, Gerald, appreciated the fact Callum could assist him, he didn't have any need for an assistant. Regardless, he told Callum he would seek him out if needed. If tragedy struck Brookside—such as an accident with multiple victims —having Callum by his side could easily save lives. Unfortunately, that left Callum without a specialised job he could fill, but he was happy to work in the fields, tending to crops, picking ripe fruits and vegetables.

Delores's mention of community was absolutely right, though. What took Callum aback was how rapidly everyone accepted him. Villagers introduced themselves the first chance they had—an overwhelming experience of too many faces and names for Callum to keep track. But as the days wore on and he fell into a routine, he made a point of greeting anyone he passed by their name.

After the ninth day, a pactrid emissary arrived at the village. Like the *gotachi*, they could speak the Anberan language. The visits were primarily to ratify their well-being, and act as a communication bridge beyond the village. On rare occasions, they would work toward solving issues beyond the village's control.

The emissary gladly accepted Callum's parchment—Rym's message—and said it would be delivered to their military's command post. The pactrid warned, however, it could take a substantial period of time before Rym received the message. Callum

nodded in understanding, but couldn't help being disheartened by the news. With every passing day, Rym's absence brought on an ever-growing sense of longing that couldn't be uprooted.

To keep his mind off that wistfulness, Callum also joined the hunters in their ventures within the forest. They taught him how to construct a snare to trap small game, filling in the gaps he'd missed while in basic training. To find an animal caught in a snare he'd built brought a genuine sense of accomplishment, and the genial compliments from the hunters roused a growing camaraderie Callum had never experienced before.

It differed from his time with the soldiers and fellow medics. That brotherhood existed, but as with all brothers, there was an undercurrent of grandstanding that didn't exist here. Although these hunters were well-versed in their craft, they felt it unimportant to boast the fact. Callum found this refreshing, and while he wasn't the bragging sort, still found it behaviour worth emulating.

His biggest challenge was learning to use a bow. The hunters were inexhaustibly patient with him, bestowing continual guidance as his skill improved. But as hard as he tried, he found himself unable to hit a target reliably. One hunter, Frederick, was especially supportive—telling Callum he was expecting too much too soon, and reassured him that his dexterity would sharpen with enough time and practise.

Despite the fellowship of the tight-knit community, when night was upon him and he lay alone in bed, nothing could stop the forlorn loneliness from washing over him. He still couldn't comprehend how his feelings for Rym had grown so strong. They barely knew each other. Reprising their goodbye in his mind, he imagined himself standing at the forest's edge. The pactrid's reaction to Callum's departure seemed clear. He was saddened by their parting. But lingering doubt within Callum seized control. What did Rym want from him? Friendship, or something more? Why was their goodbye so leaden with emotion? These questions haunted Callum each night, and exhaustion was the only reason he slept at all.

Aside from farming and hunting, Callum was assigned a third duty—one that only he could undertake. Delores stated he was the only person in Brookside who could speak the pactrid language. She suggested the entire village gather for one hour after supper, and he could teach them the basics. He scoffed at the idea of standing

before everyone—he was neither a public speaker nor a teacher. But after some gentle persuasion and avowing she'd stand beside him, acting as a mediator, he reluctantly agreed.

Much to his chagrin, she arranged the first lesson that very evening before he could reconsider their agreement. Standing before the sizeable crowd, Callum had lost his voice. Delores took charge—as she always did—prompting Callum with "How do you say *hello*?" To Callum's astonishment, that leading question was all he needed to begin the lesson. He spoke of different greetings and farewells, having the crowd repeat each word multiple times, then advanced to short sentences in the pactrid language. The hour passed by in mere moments, and the villagers applauded Callum for sharing his knowledge. Afterward, individuals approached to thank him personally, enthusiasm for the next lesson written on their faces. Callum's blushing cheeks gave away his embarrassment in response to their appreciation.

That was his routine—busy, yet uniquely fulfilling. The days flew by uncounted, which was probably for the best. Of course, Rym was never forgotten, but the pain of his absence tentatively ebbed away. Each passing day heightened the possibility the pactrid would return, evolving that sense of absence into anticipation.

One sweltering afternoon while harvesting potatoes, Callum had his attention pulled by the sound of children laughing in the distance. Still on his knees, he shifted his wide-brimmed straw hat to discover the source of the commotion. The children orbited a large pactrid, happily repeating the words they'd learnt from Callum. A villager led them toward the fields, pointing in Callum's direction.

The pactrid's gait was unmistakable.

Callum bolted upright and leapt over rows of potatoes—his hat flying in the breeze, forgotten. Rym, shielding his eyes from the sun, lumbered into the fields toward him. He advanced prudently, trying his best to keep from stepping on the produce. The children stopped their playful chants, watching from afar with curiosity, likely unaccustomed to such a display between a human and pactrid. Callum didn't care what anyone thought. His vision narrowed on all that mattered.

With mere metres to spare, Rym dropped to one knee and held out his arms, ready to catch him. Callum didn't slow, instead colliding into him with a crushing hug. The pactrid uttered a grunt

from the impact and wrapped his hulking arms around him. His trunk snaked over Callum's shoulder as he lowered his head to whisper in his ear.

"I missed you, pup."

It wasn't long ago that title would've angered Callum, but now hearing Rym speak it with such tenderness, Callum squeezed him tighter, eyes tearing with joy. He caught a whiff of the pactrid's scent, quite strong from the exertion of his travels. As before, he found the unusual yet masculine musk pleasing—alluring—but instead of being disturbed like last time, he took it in again. He felt so safe in Rym's arms, and the pactrid's aroma only attributed to that security.

"I missed you, too," he said, his voice cracking.

"You came back."

Callum released his grip to look Rym in the eyes—those mysterious, glittering silver eyes. "I'm sorry I left."

"I held hope you would return. Humans who learn the truth of the war find it difficult to reintegrate back into their society."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"It would've been wrong to influence your decision. As hard as it was for me to accept, I saw it was important you return home."

"But you tried damned hard to persuade me back at the outpost," Callum said with a sly grin.

Bashfully looking away for a moment, Rym muttered, "You're like no one I've ever met. I didn't want to lose you."

Those words cut through Callum, and he hugged the pactrid again. "I'd made a mistake. I know that now."

Approaching footsteps crunched in the dirt, and Callum pulled away to find Delores sporting a bemused smile.

"Care to introduce me to your . . . friend?" she asked.

Callum was unable to meet her gaze in embarrassment. "Delores, this is Rym. He's the one who found me after the transport accident." He then spoke in the pactrid language. "Rym, this is Delores—the chieftain of this village."

Delores imparted a genial nod in greeting. "It is nice to meet you." She spoke in Rym's language with a heavy accent, but Callum was still impressed by her competency from his casual teachings.

Rym bowed his head. "You honour me and my kind. Thank you."

Delores subtly asked Callum for a translation of the word

‘honour’, but otherwise understood what the pactrid said.

“If there’s anything else you want to say, I’d be happy to translate between you two,” Callum said.

She nodded and addressed the pactrid. “You’re more than welcome to stay, however I’m sorry we don’t have any accommodations for pactrid visitors.”

Rym waved away her concern. “I’m comfortable amongst the trees. If you don’t mind me camping at the edge of your village, that will serve me well.”

“Of course. This is your land. It’s a rare opportunity to host a pactrid guest, especially when they’re a *friend* of Callum’s.”

Callum made a point to hide the subtle undertones in her voice while translating. Rym bowed his head again in thanks.

She turned to leave, but then caught Callum’s eye with a shrewd smile. “We’re talking later.”

“Um, okay,” Callum muttered, trying to hide his dread.

Left alone in the relative privacy of the field, he turned his attention back to Rym. Gone was his satchel, replaced by a hefty rucksack nearly as tall as Callum. The pactrid stared back, elation written on his face. Having waited so long, Callum felt overwhelmed to finally have Rym here now. He wiped his face to clear the stupor in his head.

“I should gather up the potatoes I left. Then we’ll find you a suitable place to set up camp while the sun is up.”

Rym nodded and turned to scan the surroundings. “Where would you suggest?”

Once Callum had delivered his load of vegetables, he led Rym to a private, bucolic corner of the village—away from the houses—just within the woods. Nearby, the brook cascaded faintly along the rocky shore, and birds hidden in the boughs above sung their songs. Word of Rym’s arrival spread quickly, however, and soon villagers approached—sometimes alone, others in small groups—supplying blankets, firewood, and a covered basket of food. As each person left, they regarded Callum with surreptitious smiles, their curiosity piqued. Evidently, more had been shared than just Rym’s arrival. Callum groaned inwardly. He’d owe everyone an explanation, but it would have to wait. Even now, he couldn’t explain it to himself.

After setting up camp, Callum hooked a thumb toward the brook. “Given the hot weather, I’d planned on cooling down after my work was done. Would you like to join me?”

“Yes, that sounds wonderful. Lead the way, pup.”

Callum reached the water’s edge and couldn’t resist the temptation to dip his hand into the refreshing, flowing water. Even now, it was shockingly cold. His eyes followed the flow of water running parallel to the village before it veered right toward its unknown destination. He recalled his first night here, and the curiosity of where the water would take him if he’d allowed it. Despite the many opportunities to sate his growing wanderlust, he respected the rule that no Anberan could wander on pactrid lands unaccompanied. Callum stood and took hold of the pactrid’s hand—a couple of thick fingers, really.

“Would you be my escort?”

Rym didn’t reply, instead granting an intriguing smile. They followed the water, rounding the corner, and left the village behind.

“While we were apart, I learnt something about you,” Callum said as they walked alongside the brook.

The pactrid glanced at him with inquisitiveness. “What did you learn?”

“Scoutmaster Rymolnd Tepin is highly regarded by his cohorts.” Callum had made the effort to learn—with Ettor’s help—the correct pronunciation of Rym’s name. Judging by the pactrid’s grin, he got it right.

“My friends call me Rym.”

Callum recalled the last time he said that, not long after they first ran into each other. “Are we friends?”

Rym gave him a knowing smile. “Well, perhaps something more than friends now?”

Hearing this, Callum’s heart leapt into his throat. “What would *more* entail?” he asked nervously.

Rym shrugged noncommittally—teasingly—then pointed ahead at an escarpment. The sound of rushing water intensified as they navigated the declining terrain, and trees parted in the distance to reveal a waterfall. Afternoon sun shone through a steady mist, producing an exquisite rainbow of colour. Callum snuck a peek at his friend, finding him just as moved by the sight.

Upon reaching the edge of the gorge, Callum discerned a safe way to reach the bottom. “Do you want to go down?” he asked, pointing his planned route.

Rym took the lead, using trees as handholds while descending. Beyond the falls lay a pool of gently swirling water, making for an

inviting place to bathe. Warm sunlight shone through gaps of the towering trees, sparkling on the pool's surface. To know this beautiful place existed so close to the village, yet remained undiscovered, felt terribly wrong to Callum. He'd have to share it with the others, but for now, he'd take advantage of the privacy it offered.

Pushing his abashment aside, Callum began to undress, and Rym followed suit with a grin. Despite his curiosity to watch the pactrid, Callum kept his eyes on the water as he doffed his trousers. Even during their night at the inn on the shared bed, they'd remained clothed. Certainly, Callum had seen a pactrid naked once before—he forcibly pushed the accompanied images out of his mind—but the circumstances were so disparate, calling this moment his 'first time' felt more appropriate.

Once stripped bare, Callum risked a tentative glance over his shoulder. Rym was slower to undress—still working on removing his own trousers, all the while staring openly at Callum's naked form. Callum had nothing to be ashamed of, but compared to Rym's impressive body, he couldn't help feeling inadequate. He'd planned on waiting until Rym was ready, but couldn't take those piercing eyes any longer, so he dived into the pool. The cold water stung his hot skin, but he couldn't deny it felt good. He breached the surface and wiped his eyes to find Rym now naked, readying himself to run toward the pool. The pactrid was a sight to behold—his muscular form radiating strength and masculinity. Callum longed to touch him, hold him—to be touched by those powerful yet gentle hands, and be held close to Rym's body.

The pactrid took a few steps back, then made a running start—letting out a gruff laugh as he approached with growing speed. Wide-eyed, Callum frantically swam away as Rym jumped, tucked his legs against his chest, and held them with his arms. The pactrid broke the surface, causing an explosion of water to fly into the air and splash Callum like a short-lived torrential downpour. He burst out in laughter. Rym emerged, blowing a stream of water from his trunk, hitting Callum in the face. Callum tried blocking with a hand, but to no avail, turning his laugh into a gurgle.

Rym swam toward him, taking Callum into his powerful arms. While Callum couldn't touch the bottom of the pool with his feet, Rym could. The pactrid bent his legs to match their height, allowing Callum to perch atop Rym's thighs and hold on with no need to

tread water. Their wet skin was slick against each other—the cold water rapidly warming between their bodies. Rym's trunk slid across Callum's neck and along his back, helping to hold them close.

The crash of the falls made conversation impossible, but with Callum so close to Rym's large ear, he softly said, "I've never felt this way with anyone before."

Rym tightened his embrace, lightly crushing him for a moment, but not in a way that was unpleasant. The unostentatious show of strength only added to Callum's sense of security the pactrid gave him.

"You make me happy, too." Rym's deep voice was felt as much as heard.

Time was forgotten while they held each other, enjoying the simple pleasure of their touch. The water, however, sought to remove them. Despite Rym's warm embrace, Callum was soon shaking from the cold. Sensing this, Rym hoisted him into his arms and carried him out of the water. A part of Callum felt ridiculous and a little embarrassed, but still accepted the spark of delight it brought as well. However, instead of putting him down at the shore, Rym held him close and lumbered toward a patch of sunlit grass nearby—away from the fall's deafening roar.

Dropping to a knee, Rym gently settled Callum onto the ground, then lay down beside him. What meagre remnants of nervous modesty Callum felt were gone now, and he turned slightly to lay a hand on Rym's hefty bicep. Squeezing the firm muscle, he marvelled at its size. The weathered and tough texture of his grey skin felt softer and more supple than expected. From this angle, gazing upon the pactrid's naked form, his imposing stature felt even larger than before.

Rym glanced at Callum's probing fingers. "Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked, a hint of mirth in his voice.

"I'm sorry. Your body fascinates me." Callum grimaced and shook his head. "Let me rephrase that: *everything* about you fascinates me."

Frowning in confusion, Rym asked, "Why?"

Callum sighed, trying to detangle his thoughts in order to adequately convey his feelings. "You have a peculiar manner that begs to be uncovered and explored. The way you look at me—there's an intensity in your eyes that excites me." Rym's bemused

expression brought a faint laugh to Callum's lips. "Sorry, it's hard to explain how you make me feel, but I like it. I've never felt safer than by your side."

"You're the first human I've interacted with, and it's not at all what I expected. Aside from the small lot of refugees, I assumed humans were all monsters. When I first saw you at my camp, I was scared for my life."

Callum stared back in disbelief. "But you're so much bigger than me. How could I scare you?"

"Humans always travel in packs. I expected more were nearby or in hiding. Size isn't everything, pup. A swarm of insects can overpower an animal many times their size."

"But I was alone. That's why I ran."

Eyes creased with regret, Rym reached out to caress Callum's cheek—his thick hand encompassing his head instead. "I will never forgive myself for hitting you the way I did. I'm sorry, pup."

Callum put his hand atop Rym's own. "I told you, that was in the past. We were enemies—at least we thought we were. Please don't fret over it."

"I'll try." Rym's warm hand slid down to rest on Callum's chest. "As we travelled, I had to reconsider everything I believed about humans."

Callum couldn't help but look away in shame. "I was tricking you by 'acting nice' those first few days. I was mad at you—angry at the situation I was in, actively trying to escape."

"I can't blame you for wanting to flee, but . . . when I showed you the Spine from my memory—your reaction—was that a lie as well?"

Callum shook his head, recalling Rym touching his fallen tears. "That was genuine."

"So, despite your deception, my beliefs in you were correct?"

"I guess so. But I need to understand what you see in *me*. What's the attraction?" It felt strange to ask—almost narcissistic—but given their strange relationship, he felt it was a pertinent question. From the beginning, Rym was a closed book. That he was finally opening up was an unusual experience, and Callum was determined to learn as much as he could.

"How you observe your environment with such curiosity and awe."

"What? You mean the trees?"

Rym nodded.

"Of course!" Callum exclaimed, gesturing to the forest encompassing them. "I'd seen nothing like it up close, to stand amongst them. They're beautiful."

Rym's silver eyes glittered in delight. "You ask why I find you attractive? This is but one example. You say things that intrigue me, pup. And when you hold me tight, I feel your passion. You may be smaller than me, but you're still powerful in your own way."

Callum chuckled bashfully.

"I will admit," Rym continued, "I am envious of your body."

"*My* body? But it's pitiful compared to yours."

Rym stroked Callum's chest and stomach—his fingers riding upon the taut muscle—then took Callum's arm into his big hand, dwarfing it. "I told you, size isn't everything. You're strong, yet your movements are quick, dexterous. I'm slow and clumsy in comparison."

The pactrid's lumbering nature certainly played a part in Callum's attraction, but right now, that fact felt inappropriate to share. The last thing he wanted was for Rym to feel self-conscience about his body.

"Then we can enjoy each other's differences," Callum said. "I feel lucky that, of all the pactrids I could've met, it was you. A rare chance that we're both attracted to men—the male form."

Rym straightened and frowned in confusion. "Why would that be rare?"

"Well, men such as myself aren't the norm for humans. Most are only attracted to the opposite sex."

Rym let out a rumbling laugh. "Really? How bizarre."

"I assumed it'd be the same for pactrids."

"No. Why would you limit yourself to one sex?"

"Well, some humans are open to relationships with either sex. But it's . . . not really a choice. It just is."

"How limiting."

A smile broke across Callum's face. "I suppose when you put it that way, you're right."

They shared a laugh and lay on their backs again. Callum shuffled over to rest his head on Rym's shoulder, eliciting a deep grunt of approval from his friend. The sun and gentle breeze fulfilled their task of drying their skin, as well as lulled them to a state of drowsiness. Both welcomed it, soaking in the light's

warmth. Drifting between consciousness and sleep, Callum couldn't recall a time when he felt this tranquil. As difficult as it was to concede, being forced to leave Anbera—his home—was the best thing that could've happened to him. Now, to have Rym by his side brought a level of contentment he found intoxicating. Even without a hint of what the future would bring, he was fearless.

• • •

The sun had fallen well into the trees by the time Callum and Rym returned to their camp at the village's edge. In the distance, people milled about, finishing up the last tasks of their day. A touch of guilt washed over Callum—he'd abandoned his own afternoon chores to be with Rym. Despite the villagers' deferential attitude toward both of them, he hoped his decision hadn't raised any silent criticisms.

"Are one of those houses yours?" Rym asked while laying logs for a fire.

Callum pointed toward the line of buildings. "Not mine, specifically. I live there—the one with a wide porch—with two other men. Frederick the hunter, and Timm, a farmer."

"Do you get along?"

"Sure. I suppose we have little in common, but they're fine company." Callum snapped a few branches to add as kindling. "What about you? When you got the message of my arrival, what were you doing?"

Rym settled himself—adjusting a blanket, then sitting cross-legged atop it. He regarded Callum with a serious gaze, considering the question. "I was part of a vanguard, organising a journey."

The pactrid's cryptic nature had returned. Callum decided this was simply Rym's way. "A journey where?"

"I was grateful your message arrived when it did. Had it arrived mere days later, I would've never received it." Rym was pivoting his query—dodging it. Callum was about to restate the question, but Rym held up a hand as though sensing its call. "I left the vanguard immediately. While travelling each day, I envisioned our reunion. But I questioned our relationship—what it was, what it could be. I worried my feelings toward you weren't in line with

your own."

Once again, Rym's words mirrored Callum's own uncertainty regarding their affectionate bond. The pactrid patted the empty space on the blanket before him, inviting Callum to sit. This wasn't the first time he'd done this, but the sudden gravitas of the act brought a flutter of concern to Callum's belly. He sat opposite his friend in the same cross-legged manner, his legs touching Rym's.

"When you saw me today, you ran," Rym said. "You ran toward me with such determination—as though your life depended on it. My heart sung with joy to see this. You showed me what I hoped for." He reached out and caressed Callum's face again. "But now, there's a question I must ask you, and I fear your answer."

The concern on Rym's face was too much to bear. Callum took his big hand into both of his, holding it close. "What is it?"

"You've suffered much strife, but now you have a new home with humans who welcome you. This gladdens me. However, what I wish to ask will abolish everything you've gained." Rym swallowed before continuing. "You've come so far, but will you join me farther?"

"Where?" Callum stammered.

"Beyond the sea."

Callum's mouth hung open. His childhood memory flashed before his eyes—asking his father about sailing upon the sea. "I . . . don't understand."

"To the west, there are uninhabited lands. We, the pactrids, have made the decision to migrate there."

"You're leaving your homeland? Why?"

"The war, Cal'oom. We will never win it."

Callum glanced about at the beauty surrounding them. "This isn't worth fighting for?"

Rym's grip tightened reflexively, his eyes narrowing. "We *have* been fighting. For so long. But humans are resilient creatures. They push, they take, they destroy!" He cast his eyes down—his grip loosening, fingers caressing Callum's hands. "Our fighting only delays the inevitable, pup. I've shown you how deep the human invasion has reached. For now, our troops are holding the line, but no longer to protect our land. They hold it to allow us time to escape."

A bitter union of anger and shame swelled within Callum's being. "I'm so sorry, Rym." His words felt empty. No amount of

apology could account for the pain and misery his kind had laden onto the pactrids.

"The western lands have been proven viable. As scoutmaster, it's my responsibility to lead a vanguard deeper, to help rebuild our civilisation." A gentle finger brushed against Callum's chin, lifting it up to hold his gaze. "I ask you, would you join me?"

"I—" Callum held his breath, overwhelmed by the proposition. "Would I be a scout, like you?"

"If you wish us to be together, yes. I could teach you many things."

Uneasy exhilaration bubbled up within Callum at the prospect of mapping uncharted territory alongside Rym. He wanted to say 'yes', yet he was filled with so many questions. "But I'm human. I'm the reason your kind have to abandon your home."

Rym poked a thick finger at Callum's chest. "*You're* not the reason for any of our hardships, pup. You've already proven yourself worthy to live amongst us."

Despite his humbling words, Callum still felt the sting of accountability. Nothing would change the fact he was Anberan. That the pactrids were so forgiving only added to the simmering guilt. He let out a heavy sigh. There was nothing to gain by dwelling on this shame. "What about the sea? How do we cross it? Do you have ships?"

"Have you not seen the sea? The waves would destroy any vessel attempting to cross it."

"I have, although never up close. Are the waves really that violent?"

"Indeed they are. In order to travel, we use the tenday gap to walk the seabed while the water follows the moon." His brows creased fretfully. "But I will not hide the truth, pup. It is exceedingly dangerous. The seabed holds our lives in its hands while we cross, and it is a fickle thing. It cares not for our well-being."

As frightening as it sounded, Callum couldn't help but be intrigued by the idea of walking the sea floor. Exploring a place no one was meant to be. "Has anyone been lost while travelling it?"

Rym nodded gravely. "There's no way to build travelling beacons. The power of the sea destroys them. A few natural landmarks exist, but nothing especially distinct. The sun and the stars are our trustworthy guides, but even they can prove tricky

since they're always moving."

"Yes. I've always found the moon to be the easiest way to get my bearings."

"That's not possible for our journey. If we saw the moon, we would be lost—taken by the waves." Rym straightened his back, taking in a deep breath. "Now you understand my hesitance in asking you to join me."

Callum glanced at the village. The sky was darkening, the first stars twinkling on the eastern horizon. "But what about the human villages? Will you leave them stranded here?"

"No. Once enough settlements have been established, they will be invited to join us—to rebuild their homes and live amongst us. But this will be many cycles in the future."

"Oh, I assumed your entire race was leaving soon."

Rym shook his head. "I'm sorry I gave you that impression. This plan has only just begun. If you join me now, we would act as pioneers."

Once again, the idea of discovering new lands with Rym brought a flurry of nervous excitement within Callum. He gave his friend a wide smile. "Then I'll join you."

The pactrid's eyes widened with anticipation. "Truly?"

"It's never something I'd consider doing on my own. But with you? Yes."

Without warning, Rym awkwardly picked him up and held him in a tight embrace. Callum laughed, trying and failing to wrap his arms across Rym's wide chest.

"My heart sings with joy yet again," Rym said. "Thank you, pup."

He sat Callum on his lap with one arm tucked around to hold him steady. Sitting so close to Rym again brought on a rush of happiness within Callum, followed by a wave of trepidation about what he just agreed to. Everything in his life had turned upside-down not that long ago. He'd only just begun to regain his bearings, and now he was about to be swept away on another adventure.

"When do we leave?" Callum asked. In a way, he hoped they'd have to depart soon. Even now, the anticipation of what was to come scratched at him impatiently. Having to wait would be difficult.

"A vanguard of twelve begins their journey every tenday, in synchronisation with the moon's departure. As soon as the water

recedes, they depart."

"But you said you'd left the group of twelve upon receiving my message. What happened to the group you were part of?"

"It was no hardship on the vanguard. There is a temporary settlement where groups are organised. Another scout in waiting took my place."

"Oh. So, should we leave tomorrow?"

Rym glanced at the deep azure sky, now nearly black beyond the roofs of the village. "We should prepare for the journey tomorrow, and leave at sunup the day after. Besides, wouldn't you want to say farewell to your friends?"

Mortified, Callum cast his eyes down. In his excitement, he hadn't considered that. "You're right, of course. They've done so much for me. I don't even know how to repay them."

"Friendship isn't about repayment, pup. Kindness is its own reward. Seeing how they regard you, I believe you've made a positive impact in their life."

"I— I guess? I don't know how."

With his free hand, Rym caressed Callum's arm. "I know how they feel. You make me happy."

Callum still found himself unable to comprehend what he'd done to garner Rym's admiration, but wasn't about to ask. After all, he felt the same way about Rym. *Why question what makes me happy? Just enjoy it.* He leaned against Rym, laying a hand on the pactrid's belly. "You make me happy, too."

Rym uttered a low, rumbling hum in reply. "I only ask one thing when you say goodbye. You cannot tell anyone why you're leaving, or where you're going."

"Why not?"

"We don't want to cause undue panic amongst the population, pactrid and human alike. Once the settlements have been built, along with an evacuation protocol, then word will be sent out."

Despite the warmth emanating from Rym's bulk, Callum couldn't repress a shudder from the cooling air. Rym sensed it and held him close again. They could've lit the fire, but the mere thought of letting Rym go was more than Callum could bear. All he yearned for right now was to be held, and Rym was more than willing to satisfy that need.

• • •

Callum woke to the sight of early morning fog. The grey mist partially obscured indefinite layers of treetops, their edges blurring the farther they stood. Gentle, deep breaths from behind told him Rym was still asleep. They were lying on their sides beneath a blanket with Rym's thick arm across Callum, holding him protectively close. With each breath, the pactrid's chest against his back had rocked Callum gently to sleep.

Rym's trunk lay atop the blanket. Callum could feel the weight of it, hear the cyclical passing of air as Rym breathed. He found it fascinating, and more than once, he longed to touch it. But he didn't want to offend Rym. After all, Callum wasn't sure how he'd react if someone touched his nose in a curious manner, though the idea of it brought an involuntary chuckle, and his quavering woke Rym.

"I'm sorry," Callum said, trying to control his laughter. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Rym grunted. "Why do you laugh?"

I want to touch your nose. He didn't dare say it. Maybe one day he'd work up the nerve to ask. "It's nothing. Just a funny thought." Callum wriggled free from Rym's warm embrace and braced himself for the cold air beyond the confines of their blanket. "You try to get more sleep. I'll be back later."

Rym grunted again, pulling the blanket tight around him, then turned away from the light of the morning. Even as a giant lump under the blanket, Callum couldn't help feel drawn toward Rym. A smile broke across his face, and his heart fluttered with the knowledge they'd be travelling together.

Pulling his gaze free, he regarded the village in the distance. A few shapes milled within the fog—village folk who were early risers. He joined them, delivering hushed greetings as they passed. Arriving at Delores' home, he gave the door a gentle knock.

"Hello?" Delores' voice flowed from within. "Come in."

Upon seeing Callum's face, she offered a sly smile. "I was hoping it was you." She gestured to a pot sitting atop the stove. "Tea?"

Callum nodded. "Stay seated. I'll help myself."

She sipped from her mug, eyes watching expectantly while he

poured some tea and then sat down at the table.

"So?" she said, prompting him to begin.

"I don't know what to tell you."

"Let's begin with that smile on your face."

Only then did Callum register he was beaming, and he covered his mouth with a hand. "He makes me feel good."

"You said you were friends, but there's clearly more to this story. How did you meet that giant? And how did you two get so . . . familiar?"

Callum smirked at her subtle word choice. "If you can believe it, he was my captor. I ran into him after surviving the transport accident."

Her eyes shifted to doubt. "How does one go from captor to lover?"

Is Rym my lover? That word felt inadequate to describe their relationship, but he wasn't about to point out that fact. She'd only want more specifics—details he couldn't give. "Travelling to the *gotachi* took a few days. During that time, we slowly learnt more about each other. And by the time he delivered me, there was this spark between us."

Delores smiled warmly. "A good end to a terrible start."

"There's something I'll admit that troubles me, though. These feelings I have for him—they feel wrong. Even though I love being with him, he's a pactrid."

Her brows knit together, perplexed by his statement. "Why should that matter?"

"My entire life, I was told pactrids were our enemy, so why am I attracted to him? The first time we met, he beat me unconscious."

Delores straightened in her chair. "He doesn't still hit you, does he?"

He hurriedly raised his hands to dismiss such a horrid thought. "No! Of course not. In fact, he keeps apologising for it. But that doesn't change the fact our first meeting was violent. His treatment of me while travelling was gruff, and most of my time was spent planning how to escape. Yet, by the end of our journey, I longed to be in his arms. Doesn't that sound wrong to you?"

Her expression only filled him with more doubt. "There must have been a turning point in your relationship. Can you recall anything?"

Callum scoured his mind for any moment of time where his

feelings toward Rym had shifted. “The last night we spent together, at an inn. He did this thing to me. There’s a word for it, but I can’t remember it now. He said all pactrids have the ability to share their memories through touch.”

“I’m aware of it, but never spoken to anyone who’s experienced it. He did that to you?”

Callum nodded. “He showed me the mountains bordering our lands with theirs, and the devastation we caused by harvesting all their trees. It was terrible. When he finished, I found I’d been crying.”

Delores looked at him with a shrewd expression. “Well, that would explain everything, don’t you think?”

“But what if his touch changed me somehow? The colonel I’d reported to said something about forced suggestion.”

She shook her head. “Scaremongering fools. No, if you’re saying that interaction was the spark that changed everything, it makes sense. He shared a painful moment, and your tears told him you understood.”

Is it that simple? Callum felt a weight lift off his shoulders, but a part of him worried he was deluding himself.

Delores caught the conflict in his eyes. “How you met this pactrid and how you came to fall for each other—I won’t deny, it’s unusual. But that can also make it special, Callum. A tempered love borne of fire.”

“I don’t know if it’s love. I care deeply for him, but we barely know each other.”

“Love is simply a word to describe the indescribable. Just enjoy each other.”

Callum nodded resolutely. “I will. Thank you, Delores. I appreciate your sage words.”

She slapped his hand playfully. “*Sage words*? You’re mocking me.”

“I’m not. You’ve helped me more than you know.”

A dubious grunt rattled in her throat as she regarded him with narrow eyes.

“Now,” Callum continued, “I need to tell you the actual reason I came this morning. Rym and I—we’re leaving.”

Delores gave him a knowing nod. “After your amorous reunion yesterday afternoon, I suspected as much.” She let out a sigh. “We’ll be sorry to see you go. You’ll be living in a pactrid town or

village?"

"A village." Callum hated to lie, but Rym's logic to keep the details confidential was sound.

"Maybe you could visit us?"

Callum's eyes fell to his mug. "It's . . . quite far away. I won't be coming back."

"Oh." The regret in her voice was palpable. "When will you be leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"So soon? You leave us no time to celebrate your departure, give you a proper sendoff."

Callum's hands shot up in pleading. "Please, I don't need anything special. I plan on visiting everyone today—tell them the news and say goodbye."

"That's fine, but that's not going to stop me from planning something."

"Please, no."

Delores stared him down with a devious smile on her lips. "You've no choice in the matter. Now, I have a parting gift for you."

"What? A gift? How? I literally just told you."

She went to the kitchen and opened a drawer. "Okay, not so much a gift. More like tools you'll sorely need." She returned with a fork, a knife, and a spoon.

"I don't understand," Callum said.

Opening his hand and placing the utensils there, she said, "A pactrid village won't have human-sized cutlery."

Those words evoked a memory when he had to eat with his hands while at the pactrid inn. He burst out laughing at the image in his mind. "You're so thoughtful, Delores. Thank you."

"It's my pleasure," she replied with her familiar warm smile. "Now, get out. My day just got busy."

After gulping down his remaining tea, Callum's next objective was to catch his housemates, Frederick and Timm, before they left home for the day. He found them both enjoying their breakfast, and he shared the news, making it clear he wouldn't be returning.

Frederick rose from his seat and grabbed the spare bow and quiver he owned—the same set he'd lent Callum earlier while training him to shoot. "Take it."

"I can't accept this. It's yours."

Frederick pushed it against Callum's chest, urging him to take

it. “It’s yours now, Callum.”

“But I’m terrible with it.”

“And you’ll never get better if you don’t continue practising,” Frederick replied with a grin. “I told you before—there’s latent talent hiding in you. Just keep at it, yeah?”

Callum gave him a hug. “I will. Thanks, Frederick.”

Upon breaking their embrace, big Timm appeared looming beside them. In many ways, he reminded Callum of his friend, Oren. It wasn’t only his size, but his rough demeanour, too. That reminder was bittersweet, though. Oren’s death, and not being able to attend his funeral—to grant a proper goodbye—would always leave a hole in his heart.

“Don’t I get a hug too?” Timm asked.

Before Callum could reply, the burly farmer grabbed him into a bear hug and pulled him off his feet. Callum found himself unable to breathe until the big man was satisfied and settled him back onto his feet.

“So, you and a ’trid, huh?” Timm drawled, adding a lewd chuckle. “What’s that like?”

“An interesting pairing, I’ll give you that,” Frederick chimed in with a confounded look.

“I know it’s weird,” Callum said, trying to hide his blushing cheeks, “but he makes me happy.”

Timm laid a heavy hand on Callum’s shoulder, offering a crooked grin. “S’all that matters, I guess.”

They left the house together. Callum wished them a good day and let them know Delores was planning a farewell party. The fog was dissipating with the rising sun, revealing a growing band of villagers socialising before heading to work. Those who passed by said they were looking forward to Delores’ party that evening. Word really did travel fast here.

The morning was spent purchasing supplies using the pactrid currency he’d acquired during his brief time in Brookside. Dried meat wrapped in cloth, hardtack, as well as some waxed cheese for a treat. Knowing Rym had his own large rucksack now, he wasn’t overly concerned about the extra weight. From the doctor, he procured gauze, bandages, and a bottle of ointment for wounds. While his recent travels hadn’t resulted in any accidents, it was only a matter of time before an injury would befall them. Having the tools of his trade at hand—even these simple items—went a long

way to feeling better prepared for anything.

Carrying a small crate containing his goods, he returned to find Rym at their camp, organising his own inventory. Callum emptied the contents of his own rucksack beside Rym's items, allowing them to plan how to repack their goods in the most efficient manner. Spare clothing was washed and left to dry in the breeze.

By mid-afternoon, everything was ready for their departure. They sat together on the ground, their backs against a large tree, enjoying its shade. Knowing they'd have to wait until the next morning felt like some kind of punishment to Callum. He was raring to go—surprised by the novel pent-up excitement flowing through him. Awakening something he'd never knew existed.

Rym could clearly sense this, stating, "After a few days on the road, you'll learn to appreciate this village and a roof over your head."

Callum chuckled. "I know, but part of it is knowing you'll be with me. And crossing the sea? That's something I wanted to do when I was a child."

"Curious. Why?"

"I wanted to get away from the pactrids and the war. How ironic that, instead, I'm running away from my own kind with a pactrid."

Rym regarded him with a sombre glimpse from the corner of his eye. "I'm sorry it came to this—that you were forced to leave your home. None of this would've happened had we never met."

Laying a hand on Rym's thigh, Callum said, "I don't even want to contemplate what my life would be like without you. I'm happy we met."

Rym's massive hand covered Callum's. "It gladdens me as well."

"I'll admit it wasn't easy at first. After leaving Anbera, I feared what was to come. But at the same time, I'm surprised how quickly I've come to terms with everything. But what about you? You're leaving your home. That must be hard for you, too."

"I'm a scout. I've never stayed in one place long enough to have a place to call home." He gestured to the trees. "This is my home. All of it. And when we reach the land beyond the sea, that will be my new home . . . *our* new home."

Callum leaned over and rested against Rym. The pactrid wrapped his arm around him, holding him tight. Nothing felt more

right than this.

As the afternoon wore on, a hubbub of activity grew along the grassy avenue between the two rows of houses. Callum looked on, filled with embarrassment they'd go through so much trouble for someone who'd just arrived in their village, only to leave soon after. There was no doubt he'd miss them. Never had he felt so accepted.

Two bonfires were lit near sundown. The children gathered, circling the growing flames with excited hoots of joy. Smaller cookfires scattered along the promenade wafted the smell of mouthwatering, savoury meats.

"I think we've held out as long as possible," Callum muttered. "We should join in."

He supposed the gathering could be seen as an excuse for the villagers to have a good time and enjoy each other's company as well. Callum took the lead with Rym looming in his wake. Once again, he was hit by a sudden wave of safety and security, sensing the hulking pactrid at his back. There was nothing to fear here, of course, but once in the wilderness, having Rym nearby was reassuring. A cheer grew from the crowd as they emerged from the gloom. Both Callum and Rym bestowed wide smiles and waved in greeting, giving their humble thanks for such an honourable farewell.

Over the course of the evening, villagers bid them personal goodbyes. Many also spoke to Rym directly, showcasing the language lessons Callum had given them. Even in the short time together, they'd shown great promise and willingness to learn. A pang of regret burnt within Callum, knowing he'd be abandoning their tutelage. And with the knowledge of the impending change—a grand exodus from this land—he understood the importance of humans learning the pactrid language. Perhaps once the entire populace had made the journey across the sea, humans and pactrids would live closer together—learning to speak both languages fluently. A whimsical notion, certainly, but still an aspiration worth aiming for.

As the celebration fell to a natural close, Callum felt the need to address the crowd. What he wanted was a stage or raised platform, but nothing of the kind existed here.

"Excuse me," he said, rather timorously. No one heard him over the din, so he cleared his throat and tried again with more vigour. "Excuse me!"

A trumpeting call blasted out, cutting through the roar of the crowd and echoed out across the treetops. Callum nearly lost his balance from the fright of it—hit by flashes of grim memories. Vicious assaults, screaming, blood and broken bodies. The crowd reacted in kind, stunned to silent shock. Only the crackle of bonfires and a few children falling to tears could be heard.

Callum turned to Rym. “Why did you do that?” he stammered.

Rym, mouth agape, stared out at the crowd in disbelief and confusion. He held out his hands in apology. “You were— I was only attempting to gain their attention.”

Letting out a long sigh, Callum turned toward the crowd. “I’m sorry. Rym doesn’t understand how much we fear that sound. What it means to us. He was only trying to help me get everyone’s attention.”

After a prolonged pause, someone replied, “Well, it worked,” punctuated with a nervous laugh.

That acted as a panacea to soften the blow Rym had dealt. Waves of tense laughter rose from the villagers, accompanied by huffs of relief. Callum glanced back to find Rym fallen to his knees, head sunken in shame.

“It was an honest mistake,” Callum said to him. “I never told you what the pactrid call means to us. On the battlefield, it means death.”

Crushing realisation dawned on Rym’s face. “I’m sorry. Please tell them I didn’t mean to frighten them.”

“I already did. They understand that wasn’t your intent.”

The villagers observed the interaction, certainly noting Rym’s distress. They likely understood parts of the conversation.

“Look at the poor big guy,” someone said woefully, and then continued in the pactrid language, “Please do not sadness.”

Despite the poor grammar, the message was clear. Rym observed the villagers’ faces. Their fear had evaporated, replaced by worry for Rym’s distress.

“I just frightened you,” Rym said, “yet you show concern for me?” Wanting to be sure Rym was properly understood, Callum translated for the crowd as the pactrid continued. “You humans fascinate me. Some of your kind are capable of such terror, yet you, who stand before me, have only welcomed me with kindness and acceptance.”

Delores emerged from the throng, approaching Rym with a

smile. “For so long, we believed pactrids were monsters. But your kind showed us the truth, and for that, we are thankful. Yet despite the terrible things we’ve done to your kind and your land, you still ungrudgingly accept humans here—allowing us to live our lives in relative peace. The kindness and acceptance we’ve given you today is merely a looking glass toward the pactrids. We learnt it from you, and we will be eternally grateful.”

As if on cue, the crowd cheered and applauded the pactrid. Delores urged Rym to stand, then returned to the crowd to join them in their revelry. Flickers of light from the bonfires revealed the rims of the pactrid’s eyes were wet, but he wiped those budding tears away before they could form.

Once the cheering had died down, Rym addressed them again. “While you have only known Callum for a short while—as I have—there was something special that attracted him to me.” Callum couldn’t help but blush as he translated. “Now, I see many of those qualities in all of you. A part of me is saddened that I am taking him away from your village. But I must admit, there’s a selfish part of me glad not to share.”

This brought a rumble of laughter from the villagers.

“To be clear,” Callum interjected with a grin, “he’s not forcing me anywhere. I’m going with him willingly.”

Timm’s unmistakable voice stood out from the crowd. “You just want that pactrid dick!”

The crowd broke out in astonished hysterics. The laughter was innocuous, but that did nothing to stop Callum’s face from turning a deep red at the joke. He could’ve tried to explain sex with Rym was the last thing on his mind, but his words would’ve fallen to deaf ears. He decided to let them believe what they wanted. It made no difference to him.

Rym looked to Callum, puzzled by the uproar.

“A rude joke I’m not going to repeat,” Callum said. He then turned to speak to the crowd. “Thanks, Timm, for sharing your . . . umm, thoughts.”

“Happy to serve, my friend,” Timm called out, causing another ripple of chuckles from the group.

“Seriously, though. Thank you again, everyone, for everything you’ve done for me during my time here. I won’t ever forget you.”

The mass of villagers joyfully circled around Callum and Rym, almost like a group hug of a hundred people. For Callum, this

moment was bittersweet. He never knew such a life of joy could be possible, and yet he was walking away from it eagerly. For all the happiness this village could provide, it was but a speck compared to Rym's touch.

SEVEN

Vanguard

Countless days passed as Callum and Rym hiked westward toward the sea. Only the procession of the slow-travelling moon gave them any clue how long they'd travelled. Not that it mattered. With no scheduled date to reach their destination, there was no need to push themselves beyond their limits. The rising sun didn't dictate when to break camp each morning. Instead, the day's journey commenced at their leisure. In the afternoon, if they encountered an agreeable spot to set up camp, they'd stop there rather than push on.

That extra time wasn't wasted, though. Callum demonstrated his newfound trapping skills to Rym, and the pactrid contributed additional insight to bolster Callum's methods. While they waited for snares to catch their supper, Callum practised with his bow—hanging up simple targets from low branches to shoot at. Rym watched on with curiosity, providing words of encouragement when Callum missed, or delight when a target was hit. On rare occasions when their snares were ineffective, they still had rations to fall back upon.

Rym restated his allure to Callum's dexterous form, declaring pactrids were unable to use a bow due to their large, clumsy

fingers. Wanting to prove Rym wrong, Callum recounted his observations of how nimble Rym's fingers appeared, despite their size. More than once, he suggested the pactrid try his hand at shooting, but each time he was rebuffed.

Having always relied on transporters to travel long distances, Callum found walking day after day without respite quite onerous. Each night, his weary legs ached. After grousing about it once, Rym took it upon himself to massage Callum's legs with his warm, powerful hands. Perhaps it was a clever excuse to touch him, but Callum certainly didn't mind. Rym stated travelling was seasoning his legs, and that each day, his endurance would improve. Given the imposed time limit upon crossing the seabed, having the fortitude to travel longer would be to everyone's benefit.

As they neared their destination, Callum became increasingly fascinated by Rym's talent for spotting unassuming landmarks—a babbling stream; a subtle depression in the path; a uniquely shaped tree. How he recalled such simple details and use them to pinpoint their location left Callum dumbfounded. *Scoutmaster indeed. If he intends to teach me the craft, I have so much to learn.*

Having never travelled this way, Callum couldn't remark on specific landmarks, but one change he did observe was a shift in the variety of trees growing in the region. Distinctive leaves—smaller in size—sprouted from differently structured limbs. Mentioning this brought an elated smile to Rym's face.

"I'm proud of you for noticing, pup. These species are hardier, able to withstand the salty sea air and vicious winds."

"So we're close to the sea?"

Rym stopped him and gestured ahead. "Listen carefully. What do you hear?"

Callum cocked his head, analysing the sounds of the forest. Birdsong; the subtle creak and groan of trees swaying in the wind; the rustle of leaves. Beyond that, he heard a distant roar, nearly imperceptible had he not been focusing. It was the crash of water upon rock.

He bolted in that direction. "Come on, Rym!"

For the second time in his life, Callum was being chased by a pactrid, only this time, he was laughing. As before, it took little time for Rym to close the gap between them. Callum dumped his burdensome rucksack and redoubled his efforts in order to gain speed, but it made little difference. Rym's hulking stride caught up

to him, and for a moment, Callum reckoned he'd be knocked down. Instead, strong hands scooped him into the air and thrust him against Rym's chest, holding him safely as the pactrid barrelled toward a clearing beyond the forest.

Upon breaking through, Callum raised a hand to his face, shielding his eyes against the bright sunlight. Huffing from the exertion, Rym dropped to a knee, then held Callum to stand and balance atop it. Callum squinted in the light, allowing his eyes to adjust so he could take in the sight before him. Beyond a meadow of long grass sat a modest pactrid settlement. The unadorned wooden buildings were hastily built, constructed for purpose rather than aesthetics. Sea birds circled above in the blue sky, their distinct call wrenching Callum's heart at the memory of Anbera.

The crash and roar of the sea was much louder than he'd ever experienced back home. But even from his high vantage point, it was only heard, not seen. Pulled by the sea's dynamic anthem, Callum leapt from Rym's knee and headed along the path that cut through the swaying grass. They ignored the settlement, instead stepping toward a sheer stone cliff overlooking the sea, akin to Anbera. The water, however, was frighteningly closer than his view at home. Instead of a vertigo-inducing descent from the cliff's edge, it was a mere ten metres to the ferocious waters.

Powerful waves crashed and swirled relentlessly—an endless fight for supremacy that was won and lost moment to moment. Rym had warned they'd be lost to the sea if they didn't reach land in time. Only now could Callum truly appreciate what he meant. Anyone—human or pactrid—caught in those waves would be torn apart, not drowned.

"Ho!"

A husky voice to their left broke the spell that held Callum entranced by the mesmerising sea.

"Greetings," Rym replied, raising a hand in acknowledgement to an approaching pactrid.

"Hello," Callum said, hoping that speaking their language would soften any resistance to having an Anberan visit their settlement.

The pactrid—stocky, with a firm yet large belly fighting against his tunic—regarded Callum with eager excitement in his eyes. Despite his shorter height, he still towered over Callum. After what felt like too long a moment, the pactrid tore his gaze away to

look up at Rym. “My name is Cior. Are you to be part of our vanguard?”

“I hope so. I’m scoutmaster Tepin.” Rym then gestured toward Callum. “This is my companion, Cal’oom. We will be travelling together as one.”

It was difficult for Callum to distinguish Cior’s age, but he guessed the pactrid was older than the troops he encountered before, but certainly younger than Rym. His demeanour was certainly milder than the young troopers he’d met in the past.

Cior bestowed a cordial nod to both of them. “We would be honoured to have you travel with us. Cal’oom, I will admit allowing a human to be part of a vanguard is quite rare, but as scoutmaster Tepin’s companion, you are more than welcome.”

“The honour is mine,” Callum said with a bow of the head. “Are you a scout as well?”

Seemingly impressed by Callum’s guess, Cior let out a hearty chuckle, his belly jiggling in time with his laughter. “I am. You speak our language well, human.”

“He was an interpreter for his kind,” Rym said, “as well as a medic.”

Cior’s eyes lit up. “A medic? Our current roster is missing such an important role. It’s fortuitous you’ve arrived when you did.”

A part of Callum was relieved he wouldn’t be regarded as dead weight on this journey. Concern rose, however, realising he’d never treated a wounded pactrid before. He supposed their biology didn’t differ that much from humans—at least, he hoped so.

Rym laid a comforting hand on Callum’s shoulder. Perhaps he could sense Callum’s unease. “Could you show us where we’ll be staying while we wait for the sea to pass?”

“Of course,” Cior replied, turning to lead them inland—southeast—to one of the long, nondescript buildings. “We still have two positions open in the current vanguard roster—well, one position now that you’ve arrived. Normally, we travel in troops of twelve, however, I believe including a human as a thirteenth traveller will be acceptable.” He gazed skyward to the moon, barely visible in the daylight. “We have four days before we begin our journey, so you will have time to recuperate.”

Cior entered the building and held the door open for them to follow. The building’s rock foundation was nearly a metre high. Despite a flat stone acting as a stair up to the doorway’s threshold,

it made for an awkward step, even for Rym. Callum had to climb up.

"I apologise," Cior said, imparting a bashful glance at Callum. "When this settlement was built, humans were never considered. This area tends to suffer from flooding during the rainy season. The stone footing protects us from this."

Callum smiled and nodded in understanding. "It's no trouble."

Rows of bunk beds lined the opposing walls. By Callum's count, the barracks could sleep forty-eight pactrids, but with only a few windows to let sunlight in, it was hard to be sure. Rugged footlockers pulled double duty as a boost to reach the upper bunks. There was no way Callum would sleep up there. He'd take a lower bunk. And while he'd prefer to sleep snuggled to Rym—as they had every night during their journey here—he surmised that would be deemed inappropriate here.

Cior led them farther into the building, passing by bunks already claimed. Personal effects lay strewn on some beds, and clothing hung from hooks on the wall. On one bed, a journal lay open with a quill and stoppered inkpot atop it. Perhaps a vanguard member was chronicling their journey. For a barracks, it was surprisingly chaotic and unkempt, yet this didn't displease Callum. It had the opposite effect—the place felt welcoming and cosy, despite the fact everything towered over him. Had a barracks back home ever fallen to such disarray, he could only imagine what kind of disciplinary actions their superiors would've inflicted upon them.

Seven rows deep, Cior gestured to a bunk. "You two can share this one."

"Thank you," Rym said, tugging at the strap of his heavy rucksack to doff it.

At that moment, Callum uttered a sigh, realising his belongings had been left forgotten on the forest path. "I, uh—"

Rym glanced over, then comprehending the problem, gave him a mirthful grin.

"You rest here. I'll be back," Callum said.

Before Cior could enquire what the problem was, Callum darted for the exit and jumped down from the threshold. The rush of the sea heartened him—a warm ball in his belly that rose to his chest. After being away from it for so long, he realised now how much he'd missed it.

He jogged the short distance east through the grassy meadow

and back into the forest. Rounding a shallow corner, instead of expecting to find his rucksack, he spotted a pactrid wearing leather armour, likely a soldier. Callum stumbled at the sight, his boot knocking against a root crossing the path. The pactrid, crouched to inspect the fallen rucksack, shot his gaze toward Callum. A scar along the cheek marred his grizzled face, and his right ear was torn from an old injury. He stood and immediately pulled a sword free from his scabbard.

It all happened so fast, Callum found himself frozen in shock. His mind refused to issue a command, a suggestion—anything to aid him in this moment.

The pactrid lumbered toward him with teeth bared. “Pass,” he said in Callum’s native language, albeit with a thick accent.

Callum blinked, trying to find his voice.

“Pass!” the pactrid bellowed, swiftly closing the space between them with his sword raised.

At last, Callum broke free of his stupor, finally understanding what the soldier wanted. “Yes, I have a pass,” he replied in the pactrid’s language, jamming his hands in his pockets, trying to find the token proving he was allowed to travel their land—*but only with an escort, damn it!*

The pactrid was nearly upon him when he finally found the pass in a jacket pocket. With a shaky hand, Callum held it up high. The soldier ripped it from his grasp, glaring at him before inspecting it.

“I’m with Scoutmaster Tepin,” Callum managed to say after swallowing hard. Hopefully mentioning Rym would cut him some slack.

The soldier regarded him with an inquisitive stare—a look Callum was growing familiar with whenever he spoke the pactrid language. “I don’t know who you speak of. Why are you alone? Where is this scoutmaster?”

“He’s at the settlement, not far from here.” Callum gestured at his rucksack on the path. “I was retrieving that. It’s mine.”

A moment of relief crossed the pactrid’s face. “The settlement is near? I’ve been travelling many days.”

Callum nodded. After handing back the pass, the pactrid gestured toward the rucksack.

“Get your bag. But no tricks, human.”

Callum nodded again and scurried toward his goal. Sword still

drawn, the pactrid followed close behind, heavy footfalls threatening to crush Callum if he didn't move fast enough. Upon donning his rucksack, Callum guardedly looked up, asking for direction. He hated this, but couldn't fault the pactrid for being angry. After all, he'd broken the rules.

The soldier gestured with his sword, pointing to the path leading to the settlement. "You lead, human. I want you in my sight."

"I don't mean you any harm," Callum said, aiming to garner some leniency, but a bitter scoff told him he was wasting his time.

Once they'd reached the forest's edge, Callum craned his neck in a failed attempt to see over the long grass. He wanted to call out to Rym, but didn't want to risk antagonising the soldier at his heels. Once clear of the grass, Callum caught sight of Rym leaning against the wall of the barracks, chatting with Cior.

"Whose human is this?" the soldier bellowed.

Rym turned at the voice, and upon assessing the situation, ran toward them with intent. Callum fought against his need to run toward Rym, but the fear of being cut down held him in place.

"What's the meaning of this?" Rym demanded.

"Scoutmaster Tepin? Your human was roaming free without a minder. Explain yourself."

Before Rym could reply, Cior reached the group with his hands gently raised. "Stand down. There's no need for that weapon. We're all friends, here."

"Friends?" The soldier's tone was indignant. "This *asafari* is no friend of ours."

This was the second time Callum had been called this name. Even with no clue to its meaning, the malicious insinuation was clear. Rym positioned himself to allow Callum to sidle near his leg. While the soldier's sword was still drawn, it was held down in a less threatening manner.

"He is one of the rare humans," Cior said, then lowered his gaze to Callum. "You *do* have a pass, yes?" He stumbled over his words uneasily, realising he should've requested it during their initial meeting.

"Yes, of course," Callum said, revealing it for all to see. "I showed it to him already."

"There," Cior said with a nod of reassurance. "Now, if you'd kindly put away your weapon, we can introduce ourselves

properly."

Irritably sheathing his sword, the soldier mumbled, "I'm Eudald."

"I assume you'll be a member of our protection detail?"

Eudald grunted in affirmation.

"Very good. Your fiery temperament will be appreciated when we need it most. I'm Cior, scout."

Callum felt the scout was risking another outburst by such a statement, but Eudald appeared to appreciate the comment.

"This is scoutmaster Rymolnd, and his companion, medic Cal'oom," Cior said.

Eudald turned his attention to Rym. "This human is part of the vanguard?"

Rym glowered back, almost inviting a fight. "Yes, he is."

Jabbing a finger in Callum's direction, Eudald said, "We're losing our home because of these animals. What gives this human the right to be here?"

Cior lay a gentle hand on Eudald's shoulder, but the soldier flinched it away. "Because he's a victim as much as we are. You must know the human refugees will take part in the exodus."

"Yes, but I was looking forward to be free of them for a time—at least a few cycles."

Again, Cior tried to comfort Eudald with a friendly touch. This time, the soldier accepted it. "I think we all need to settle down. Come with me, and I'll show you to your bunk."

Eudald nodded begrudgingly and fell in line behind Cior, who led him into the barracks. Once they were out of sight, Rym crouched to a knee before Callum.

"Are you hurt?"

A vile mix of anger and regret burnt Callum's throat. Anger at Eudald for how he treated him, and regret that the soldier was so filled with hate. Callum couldn't blame Eudald for that hate, though, and that only added to the churning fire within him. "No, but I'm worried my being here is going to cause problems. We've not met the others yet. What if they hate me, too?"

"Eudald doesn't hate you—"

"I'd say that's a perfect example of hate," Callum replied with a fierce stare.

Rym nodded, unable to meet his gaze. "I'm sorry, pup."

"So am I."

• • •

Rym and Callum wandered north, away from the settlement, giving time for Cior to hopefully calm Eudald down. On Callum's urging, they returned to the cliff's edge to bask in the western setting sun. Soon, Callum's hand found Rym's, and they sat to watch the churning sea in silence. The wind whipped up at times, bringing with it a refreshing light spray of seawater. A smile grew on Callum's face. The sea had a special way of relieving him of unwelcome emotions—its power to do so never faltering. *Of course, having a protective friend by my side helps, too.*

As though sensing this, Rym said, "The sea can work wonders."

Callum laughed, hugging the pactrid's bulky arm. "We think alike."

He caught sight of Cior approaching them prudently, stopping at a fair distance, not wanting to intrude. Still wearing a smile, Callum gestured for the scout to join them, and Cior's timidity melted away as he lumbered toward them with a wave.

"Thank you for your diplomatic talents," Rym said.

"Yes," Callum added, "and I'm sorry to have caused such trouble."

Cior stared at Callum with disbelief. "The fault falls upon Eudald, not you."

Callum wanted to argue that Eudald's hate—while misplaced—was justified, but decided to keep that to himself. "You say you're a scout, but you have the qualities of a leader."

Cior waved away his remark with a flustered chuckle. "Katock is the leader of our group, although he has given me station as second-in-command. A benefit to being long-time friends, I suppose."

"Friend or not, I'd say Katock's decision is warranted," Rym said.

"You embarrass me."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. You handled that confrontation admirably." Rym stood up and discreetly gestured for Callum to follow suit. "Could you introduce us to the rest of the group?" he asked Cior.

“Yes, yes. That’s why I came to find you. Supper will be ready soon. Everyone will be together to meet you, Cal’oom, and Eudald.”

They stopped by the barracks, allowing Callum to finally drop off his rucksack. Opening a side pouch, he retrieved the cutlery set Delores gave him. He silently thanked her for catching such an oversight, then slipped them into his trouser pocket.

The scout led them deeper into the rustic settlement, comprising five buildings of varying shapes and sizes. Each held a purpose—the barracks, of course, as well as a mess hall, warehouse, and two multipurpose workspaces. No one was meant to live here permanently. It was only a base of operations to accept arrivals and prepare them for travel across the sea. The settlement would likely need to expand once the exodus began in earnest, but at the moment, there was no point in developing beyond their immediate needs. After all, they were abandoning this land. Why waste time and resources?

“How do we reach the shore once the sea recedes?” Callum asked.

Cior pointed south. Beyond the space cleared to build the settlement, the forest reigned. “The cliffs break away, making for a smoother path leading to the water’s edge.”

Reaching the mess hall, a waft of savoury cooking pulled Callum closer. His mouth watered. Although he and Rym had trapped wild game during their travels, cooking over a campfire never resulted in a sumptuous meal. It was often charred to ensure the meat was properly cooked through. While it did the job to keep them fed, the taste was mediocre at best.

The mess hall was, no surprise, a simple affair. Two rows of long tables with bench seating. Stout candles—their base ensconced with layers of melted wax—sat in the centre of the tables at regular intervals. At the opposite end was a food preparation and cooking area, currently manned by a pactrid tending to hot coals below the grill.

“That’s Fyrne, our cook,” Cior said, then pointed to four pactrids—two male and two female—sitting and chatting at the table. “Those are our labourers, Oulaan, Qarrj, Gaode, and Huash.”

Reminded of his arrival at Brookside, Callum grimaced inwardly. So many new people to remember, and the foreign nature of these pactrid names didn’t help matters.

“I’ll introduce you to the others later on,” Cior said, gesturing

for them to sit. In Callum's case, he needed to stand in order to see over the table, but that was fine. He was tall enough to comfortably lay his hands out and eat when the time came.

Fyrne's delicious cooking meant no supper bell was required. Mere minutes later, more pactrids streamed in and seated themselves. It didn't take long for Callum's presence to become known. Curious glances and furtive whispers broke out. A nervous ball lodged itself in Callum's gut, and he looked up to Rym in concern.

The pactrid placed his big hand atop Callum's. "Don't fret, pup," he said in a low voice.

Eudald entered and immediately locked eyes with Callum. The raw hatred from before was gone. Now, simmering contempt stained his features. He sat at the far end of the other table, away from the others. Hopefully, he'd keep his distance from Callum, too.

Another pactrid arrived, and Cior waved to catch his attention. The pactrid approached, his eyes shifting distractedly between Callum and Cior. The low rumble of conversation fell to silence as he stood before them.

Cior raised his voice for all to hear. "Katock, I would like to introduce Rymolnd and Cal'oom."

Rym stood and accepted the leader's hand in greeting. "Scoutmaster Rymolnd Tepin, but please, Rym is fine." He gestured to Callum, still standing on the bench. "This is my companion, Cal'oom."

At least with the height advantage, Callum didn't have to look up so high. His eyeline was closer to the leader's chest rather than his crotch.

"He'll be our medic," Cior chimed in.

Katock regarded Callum with a scrutinising eye. "A human medic as part of our vanguard?"

"I hope you'll accept me," he replied, holding out his hand in a welcoming manner.

Once again, hearing an Anberan speak their language brought on murmurs of surprise and astoundment. A smile broke across Katock's face, and he accepted Callum's greeting—his hand dwarfing Callum's. The squeeze was firm yet gentle.

"It cheers my heart to know not all humans are alike. I know of the refugees who live on our lands, but I've yet to meet one in person—until now. We must band together, pactrid and human, to

build a better home."

"You honour me," Callum said, then spoke up to make sure the crowd could hear clearly. "You all honour me. I only recently learnt the truth about what humans have done to the pactrids and your land. What surprised me more is that you would accept those of us who don't hate your kind." He made a point of looking at Eudald. The soldier caught his gaze and returned it, his lips a grim line. "Regardless, I have much to prove to you. All I ask is you give me that chance."

Group members exchanged glances with their neighbours. Judging by their expression, the general mood they conveyed was one of reluctant acceptance. That's all Callum could hope for at this point.

"We will certainly give you that opportunity, Cal'oom," Katock said.

"And we've had one more arrival today," Cior said, nodding to Eudald.

The soldier, still clad in leather armour, rose from his seat and approached Katock. "I'm Eudald, soldier and protector."

"Well met, trooper," Katock said, holding out a hand.

Eudald accepted the greeting with a firm grip, then gave Callum a sidelong glance. "Unlike some who would speak it carelessly, the word 'honour' has profound meaning to me. *I'm* honoured to aid in escorting this vanguard safely across the sea, and protecting you all from danger once we reach our destination. My life is yours."

"We accept it willingly, but we will not squander it, either." Katock addressed the crowd. "Ignasi?"

"Yes, leader?" a female pactrid replied with a raised hand.

"You and Eudald will be our protection detail."

Eudald turned toward Ignasi, giving her a respectful bow of the head. She returned it in kind.

Katock returned his attention to the soldier. "Will we have a problem?" he asked discreetly while glancing at Callum.

"The human?" Eudald asked.

Katock nodded.

"No, leader."

"Good." Katock then addressed the group. "Let us eat."

• • •

As night fell, each member of the vanguard retired to their bunks. Some individually, others in small groups. In no rush to follow suit, Callum instead wandered the meadow and edges of the forest—enjoying the complex song of emerging night insects and the ever-present sea. The idea of sleeping in a barracks filled with pactrids raised a question that frightened him, though. *When will I meet another Anberan?* Despite the days of travel away from Brookside, only now did the question become apparent.

Rym kept to his side, but didn't attempt to initiate a conversation. Guilt trickled into empty gaps of Callum's mind. He felt like a burden on Rym—that the pactrid always had to remain nearby. Both knew it was for the best, however. Neither wanted a repeat of being found without an escort. And Rym acted as a safety buffer from Eudald. In spite of the guilt, Callum still selfishly appreciated Rym's presence. They'd grown to understand each other during their time together—appreciate each other's nuances. Judging by his demeanour, Rym could sense Callum's unease, but knew well enough Callum would voice any concerns troubling him if he wanted to discuss them.

Right now, Callum didn't know how to convey his thoughts. Viewed from another's perspective, Rym's offer at Brookside for Callum to accompany him could've been seen as heavy-handed coercion. They barely knew each other at the time. But despite Rym's occasional inscrutability, Callum couldn't help but be captivated by the pactrid's enigmatic charm. And for reasons he couldn't explain, Callum trusted him.

In retrospect, making such a life-altering decision with so few details was foolhardy. But at this moment, Callum decided the agreement to join Rym had been solely his choice, and he'd yet to regret it. The pactrid had persistently shown he truly cared for Callum. *What did I do to deserve you, Rym?*

In the failing light, Callum looked up to his friend. Rym dropped to a knee, his eyes searching for answers.

"Please talk to me, pup."

Callum released a long sigh. "I guess I'm just homesick." It wasn't a lie, but he hoped that would sate the pactrid's curiosity for the time being.

“You were exiled without a chance to say goodbye to those you loved,” Rym said, holding a hand to Callum’s face. “Your heartache is understandable, but time will help to mend those wounds.”

“I really don’t know how I’d manage without you.”

“I’m glad to ease your pain, but you’ve shown that you would manage fine without me.”

Callum shrugged. “I guess I was managing at Brookside, but over the long term, I don’t think I would’ve been happy there.”

Rym sat down cross-legged and hunkered down to keep their eyeline level. “Why do you believe that?”

“Everyone there was nice, but I couldn’t see myself connecting with anyone—not like what we have.” Never had Callum known someone so in tune with him. It was as though they could hold conversations with only a look. Something as simple as Rym’s smile made Callum’s heart sing. He reckoned he understood what love was, but his feelings toward Rym were beyond compare. It was so special that he didn’t dare speak the word aloud for fear of shattering everything they had.

Rym’s silver eyes appeared to twinkle as he smiled. “Yes, what we have is unique.”

“But you’re over one hundred cycles in age. Surely there have been others you cared about? Someone special to you?”

The pactrid contemplated the question with pursed lips. “As I said before, I’ve never lived in one place for long. This is unconducive to any relationship.”

“You never encountered another scout who made you feel the same way?”

“Not until I met you.”

“But I’m not a scout.”

Rym gave him a crooked grin. “Maybe not now, but soon.”

The sea breeze, cooling in the night air, caused the long grass and trees to sway. Callum shivered.

“Come, pup. It’s been a long trip. Let’s enjoy the beds while we can.”

A lantern hanging by the barracks door served as a beacon, drawing them in. Inside, the vanguard members were in various states of undress, preparing to sleep—some already under their blankets, others chatting amongst themselves. Cior, in his wisdom, had assigned Eudald far away from their own bunk. Sitting on his

bed and stripped to his waist, the soldier's chest and arms were tarnished with a myriad of scars. He observed them warily as they passed by. Neither Callum nor Rym presented any resistance. There was nothing to gain in making a scene, especially right now, when everyone was readying for sleep.

As they stepped up to their bunk, Callum longed to share Rym's bed, cuddled in his embrace. A smirk crossed his face, imagining how the others would react. Having an Anberan within their ranks was already asking a lot. To discover the relationship between himself and Rym might push some over the edge. He doubted they'd be able to keep it secret forever, but perhaps they wouldn't have to. In his short time amongst the pactrids, he'd come to discover they were quite open-minded.

"I'll take the top," Rym said, stripping down to his loincloth and climbing the footlocker to the upper bunk.

Callum had seen Rym naked several times, but that didn't stop him from surreptitiously looking. The pactrid's muscular body continued to captivate and excite him, only strengthening the want to sleep by his side. Now, however, as he undressed, he sensed many pactrid eyes on him. No one was so bold to stare directly. Instead, sidelong glances broke any semblance of privacy. Callum supposed they were just as curious about his own human body, but accepting that was still a challenge. While standing in his breeches, he nervously folded his clothes and then literally climbed into bed. Luckily, it sat much lower than the bed at the pactrid inn, so he didn't need to suffer the humiliation to ask for help.

The vast bed could've easily slept three or four humans comfortably. To lie on it alone felt wasteful somehow. The pillow was too tall to use comfortably. Callum eyed his folded clothing bundle, considering using it as a pillow, but his embarrassment stopped him from jumping out of bed to retrieve it. Instead, he settled by bunching up the ample linen blanket. Tomorrow, he'd figure out a better solution. Above, Rym turned in bed, causing the frame to creak and groan. He had to trust the bunk could take a pactrid's weight, but regardless, he grimaced at the prospect of being crushed.

One by one, lanterns were doused until the room fell to darkness. As Callum's eyes adjusted, crisp moonlight slipped through the windows at a sharp angle. In the distance, the tumultuous sea tumbled and crashed against the stone bluffs. It was

the sound of home, yet surrounded by pactrids instead of his own kind. *Did I make a mistake?*

• • •

Breakfast did little to lift Callum's spirits. A fitful night's sleep didn't help matters. The leader, Katock, stated final preparations would only take two days, so the vanguard was free to spend this day however they desired. A time to relax sounded fine to Callum, but left his mind to wander—still debating his decision to follow Rym.

"Cior mentioned humans joining vanguards were rare," Callum said as they explored the grounds in the morning sun. "Does that mean there's humans already on this new land?"

Rym held a finger to his lip while mulling over the question. "It's possible. There should be a registry for those who've made the journey. I don't know where it would be, though."

"Someone's bound to know. Maybe Katock?"

While searching for the leader, they caught sight of Cior sitting in the grass, his back leaning against the wall of the barracks. The stout pactrid had a needle and thread in hand, mending a hole in a burlap sack. As they approached, he regarded them with a wide smile, his eyes nearly squeezed shut by his plump cheeks.

"Good morning, friends."

Callum waved in greeting. *If only all pactrids were as friendly as Cior.* "Do you know where Katock is? We wanted to see the registry, but aren't sure where it is."

"It's kept in the mess hall. I'd be happy to show you."

"We'd appreciate your help," Rym said.

Cior led them to the far corner of the mess hall and opened a cabinet lined with shelves. They held documents and various scrolls, as well as an enormous book. "Since the settlement doesn't have any permanent residents, each vanguard leader needs to read these. They contain detailed instructions on how to prepare the vanguard for departure." He rubbed a thumb against the scrolls. "Amendments come in over time. I must admit, the process is all quite disorganised."

"Are there any maps?" Rym asked.

Cior pulled a few of the scrolls out, peeking at each until he

found the one he wanted. “Presently, the maps we have of the seabed are vague at best.”

He unfurled the scroll to reveal a map that—to Callum’s untrained eye—appeared more detailed than Cior would have them believe. However, rather than a square area, the drawing was more like a strip of terrain leading from this settlement to the new land. Callum supposed if they veered off course, they could easily find themselves in uncharted territory. Rym uttered a hesitant grunt upon reviewing it.

Cior rolled up the scroll and returned it to the cabinet. “The exodus is still in its infancy. Katock said there are special groups working on producing more detailed maps, but it’s dangerous work. They travel back and forth, attempting different routes to find the most expedient way across.”

“I don’t understand,” Callum said. “Isn’t the seabed flat?”

“From the shore, the terrain is simple enough to navigate. But farther out, I’ve been told it can be confusing.”

Callum nervously glanced at Rym.

Cior caught that and raised his hands with a smile to reassure him. “Don’t fret, Cal’oom. Many have crossed safely. We only need to treat the seabed with respect and pay attention to our surroundings.”

He pulled the book from the shelf and laid it open on a table. Each page was similar in its layout—a list of entries—but since it was written in the pactrid language, it meant nothing to Callum. Curiously, each entry was written with a different hand.

“What is this?” Callum asked.

“The registry,” Cior replied, then pointed to the header of each page. “The date of departure and the leader’s name.” His finger scanned down each line item beneath the header. “Each vanguard member records their name here. Before we leave, you’ll write your name here, too.”

He turned the pages leisurely, allowing time for Callum and Rym to scan across their contents. After the tenth page, a name immediately jumped out at Callum, written in his own language. “Marcus Chaterton”

“Yes,” Cior said. “I’m sure there are other human names if you look farther.”

Knowledge that at least one other Anberan would be there brought ease to Callum’s mind. “Thank you, Cior. You’ve sated my

curiosity."

The scout smiled and returned the registry back to the shelf. "I'm happy to help. Enjoy your day, both of you."

"You as well," Rym replied, leading Callum outside with a hand on his back. Once they were out of earshot, he said to Callum, "You look relieved."

Glancing at the other pactrids loitering about, Callum took Rym's hand and led him away from the mess hall. The forest's edge provided the privacy he sought. "I'll be honest with you. It's not that I regret coming with you, but the closer we get to starting our journey, I question if I'm making a terrible mistake."

Rym dropped to a knee, his face drawn taut with concern. "I never meant to force you into doing this."

"You didn't." Callum reached up to caress Rym's face—smoothing the wrinkles of worry away, just as the pactrid had done to him countless times. "At least, not directly."

"Please. Speak plainly, pup."

Callum sighed, his eyes searching aimlessly as he tried to find the words. "The idea of never seeing you again outweighed my fear of the unknown at the time. Discovering the beauty of your land and all this travelling awoke something within me. This need to—I don't know—explore? And I've always been fascinated by the sea, what lies beyond its shores. That you offered this opportunity, and most importantly, to have you at my side." Callum bit his lip, blinking away the burn in his eyes. "How could I say no?"

"But you feel differently now?" Rym asked anxiously.

"Arriving here, a small part of me did. That I wouldn't see another human for many cycles scared me. But now, knowing I'm not the only human to embark on this journey—if this is a mistake, at least I'm not alone." Callum chuckled, but that did nothing to ease Rym's worry. "Now, I want to learn the story of how this Marcus made his own decision to leave. How he came to be accepted into a vanguard."

Rym stared back, mute. Nothing Callum was saying was easing his friend's concern. He stepped closer, wedging himself between Rym's legs, and nudged his trunk aside, allowing him to hug his wide torso.

"I'm fine, Rym. Please don't be upset."

"I feel guilty, pup. Thinking back to our time at the refugee village, I wonder if I inadvertently persuaded you."

“Maybe you did—a little bit—but you never forced me to do anything. It was *my* decision. Have you never done something where you questioned it afterward?”

The pactrid let out a tentative grunt in acknowledgement.

“You see?” Callum replied, resting his head against Rym and then hugged him again. This prompted the pactrid to return the embrace, tight and comforting. “Anyway, all the refugees will be making the journey later on. And I’d have to cross the sea regardless, otherwise I’d be captured by the Anberan army.”

“I suppose.” Rym’s voice rumbled deeply in his chest, resonating against Callum’s head. “Nevertheless, I beg your forgiveness for the inelegance of my proposition at the refugee village.”

“If it helps you feel better, I accept your apology. But understand, I don’t feel it’s needed.”

“Thank you, pup.”

Sensing eyes upon them, Rym turned his attention back the way they’d come. Partially obscured by the mess hall building was Cior, watching them with interest. Having been caught, the stocky pactrid imparted an embarrassed wave with a smile, then nearly tripped over his own feet in a hasty retreat.

Callum scoffed. “Kind of a nosy fellow.”

“He is a scout, after all. I’m sure he means no harm.”

“No, I didn’t get that impression.”

Standing, Rym lay a steady hand on Callum’s shoulder. “Our relationship is rare. I know others in the vanguard are curious as well. Cior just hides it poorly. I’m sure he’ll ask you about it soon enough.”

It didn’t take long for Rym’s premonition to realise itself. That afternoon, while sitting at the cliff’s edge again, Cior shyly approached them.

“Would you like to experience the sea more closely?” he asked.

Rym gave Callum a knowing glance before replying. “I believe Cal’oom would like that. Yes?”

A twinge of unease fluttered within Callum’s belly. Since leaving Brookside, Rym was always nearby. To be with another pactrid, one he didn’t know well, brought on a sense of nervousness. Was it a remnant of fear—the fright of pactrids he held all his life—bubbling to the surface? Rym wouldn’t be his guardian forever. And once they crossed the sea, he’d have

autonomy to live amongst the pactrids without need of an escort. He decided the nervousness he felt was needless, and turned to address Cior.

"Yes, I'd like that."

The scout beamed his squinting smile, offering a hand to Callum to pull himself up. Callum accepted it, grasping two meaty fingers to stand up.

"I will keep your ward safe, Rymolnd," Cior said with the bow of his head.

"Thank you. Enjoy yourself, Cal'oom."

Cior led Callum south through the settlement, pointing at a rough trail breaking into the woods beyond. "This way yields a safe route to the beach."

With no room for both of them to walk abreast, Cior took the lead, routinely glancing over his shoulder to ensure Callum was still following. To the west, contours in the topography sloped downward, allowing the trail to switchback toward the shore. The trees and underbrush muted the crash of the sea, but with each bend in the path, the sound of battling waves grew. At last, Callum could discern scant details between the trees. In his excitement, he contemplated running past Cior, whose lumbering gait was decidedly too slow for him to bear. But he knew better. The sea was so close now, he could tolerate another few minutes.

As they progressed, however, he questioned their safety. The roar grew to a near deafening peak, shaking the ground under his feet, and he could feel the thunderous violence rumbling in his chest. At the edge of the forest, a heap of fallen trees spoke of the sea's ferocity. Mist hung in the air—a constant spray brought on by the clashing waves. Dirt gave way to sand, and the steep downward trajectory of the beach continued unabated until reaching the water's edge.

Cior pointed at the border of the sand. "When the moon is at its peak, the water reaches this point." He had to yell in order for Callum to comprehend what he was saying.

The pactrid stepped onto the beach, then turned to offer his hand again. Frozen in fear, Callum stared back. Cior nodded, offering assurance to trust him. Taking a breath, Callum accepted the outstretched hand and proceeded onto the soft sand, and they cautiously approached the sea's edge.

Frothing waves engulfed the skyline, forming a liquid wall that

roiled hypnotically before them. Sunlight beamed through, revealing the water's crisp palette of blues and emerald greens. It appeared as though they were standing below sea level, and gazing left and right, the illusion remained. From Callum's understanding, the sea should be upon them, yet some force held it back.

Cior tugged gently on Callum's hand to urge him closer. Waterlogged sand squelched under Callum's feet, yanking at his boots with each step. The harsh crashing waves bore over them, overwhelming his senses with thunderous blasts and a salty mist. He covered his ears to lessen the pain, allowing himself to take in the terrifying, absolute power and majesty of the sea. A tear fell upon his cheek. No words could appropriately convey the awe and wonder before him.

They stood there until he could no longer endure it, then both retreated back to the forest. Before they lost sight of the sea, Callum gazed upon it again. "I've never experienced anything like that before."

"Yes. It is frightening yet beautiful."

Their voices sounded muffled. Callum dug a finger in his ear, attempting to clear whatever was causing the problem, but it made no difference. "Why does everything sound strange?"

"Don't fret, Cal'oom. I'm not sure why it happens, but it will pass in time."

Callum tried the same with his other ear, but there was no change. "Well, thank you for sharing this with me, Cior."

The scout turned to regard Callum with a thoughtful smile. "I am happy to know another who can marvel and appreciate its beauty. Most are too afraid to approach."

"Afraid? Yes. Though I can't understand how anyone couldn't admire it," Callum said with a scoff. "But the waves—they should've fallen onto us, yet they didn't. I've watched the sea all my life, but never from that perspective. I had no idea."

"Yes, the moon pulls the water in strange ways."

"And we'll be walking that seabed in a few days' time," Callum muttered to himself, stopping in his tracks. "Cior?"

The pactrid glanced back. "Yes?"

"Are you . . . nervous about crossing?"

Cior gave a hesitant smile, then sat on a fallen log. "Of course. Anyone not nervous is either lying or a fool."

"I'm glad it's not just me, then."

A moment of silence passed, then Cior's manner shifted. He grew suddenly bashful, fidgeting with his fingers. "May I ask you a question?"

Callum found the scout's demeanour charming, and couldn't help crack a smile. "Yes. What would you like to know?"

"How did you and Rymolnd meet?"

Callum stared into space, recalling the transport accident that had set everything into motion. So much had changed in such a relatively short time. "I was his captive. He took me to one of your outposts and a *gotachi* said I wasn't a threat to your kind. During that time, we grew to appreciate each other, I guess."

"Is he your mate?"

The bluntness of the question caused Callum to blush. "I— I don't know. We've become quite close—"

"Yes, I witnessed that earlier. Please understand, I didn't mean to intrude. I find humans fascinating. I've met refugees in the past, but they couldn't speak my language, and I'm unable to speak yours."

"You find us fascinating how?"

"You're so different from us. Your nimbleness leaves me envious. Yet despite your size, humans can be fierce."

Callum laughed. "Rym spoke similarly. It goes both ways, though. I find Rym's towering size . . . appealing."

That earned him a playful grin from Cior. "So he is your mate."

Callum shrugged, feeling his face redden again. His limited experiences with men had primarily been sexual in nature—an act that neither excited nor repulsed him. He always assumed it was an obligatory act in order to enjoy the other aspects of a relationship he longed for. Rym had smashed that belief to pieces.

Seeing his discomfort, Cior added, "Whatever your partnership, I see you both care deeply for each other."

"Yes, we do."

Cior gave his squinting smile again. "I am pleased you are joining us, Cal'oom."

"Thank you. I wish everyone in the vanguard was as accepting as you."

"You speak of Eudald?"

Callum nodded sullenly. The soldier had kept his distance, but that didn't stop him from staring Callum down in the mess hall and barracks. "It must be tiring to stay angry for so long."

“He fought many battles against your kind. In his eyes, you are still the enemy.”

“What should I do? Maybe try talking to him?”

Cior shook his head. “It would be best to stay away from Eudald. Your willingness to create a connection—however fragile—is commendable, but the long war between our kind cannot be so easily mended.”

“I appreciate your advice.”

“It is my pleasure.” The pactrid stood up, gesturing for Callum to lead them back to the settlement. “Shall we return?”

• • •

The settlement's laid-back spirit had been pushed to the wayside the following day. Katock gave each member tasks to perform in preparation for their departure. Callum’s duty was to prepare the goods currently stored in the warehouse. Items to be carried by the vanguard included building tools, rope, bolts of cloth, blankets, cooking pots, and miscellanea Callum would’ve never reckoned to bring.

Sitting along one wall within the warehouse were twelve crate-like containers bound with thick leather straps and numerous buckles. The straps served a dual purpose—to keep the crates bound securely during the journey, as well as to carry them on one’s back. Callum was tasked with distributing the goods evenly among the twelve crates, allowing each pactrid to bear its load comfortably. They were of considerable size, reaching up to his chest. Luckily, as the thirteenth special member, Callum would only have to carry his own rucksack.

Once the goods had been arranged accordingly so not to shift while being hauled, a thin wooden divider was firmly placed atop everything. That left a narrow space to store provisions for the journey. Fresh water in skins, hardtack, and dried meat strips. The supplies were rationed out to last exactly ten days. There was no reason to carry extra. If they didn’t reach land after the tenth day, the sea would swallow them. Given Callum’s food and water needs were dramatically less than a pactrid, he would carry some in his rucksack, and Rym agreed to share a small portion of his own

rations.

Katock visited Callum several times to scrutinise his work. He never made any comment or complaint, only a curt nod to continue, so Callum assumed the leader was content with his progress. Upon completion, one whole day and half of the next had passed. One concern that kept creeping into his mind was the weight, and Callum mentioned this while reporting to Katock.

“Your consideration is appreciated, medic Cal’oom,” the leader said while leading him back to the warehouse. “Let me assess the weight.”

After a brief inspection of the crates, Katock picked one at random for the test. He squatted down, then pushed his broad back against the crate. Looping two straps over his shoulders, he secured them with a buckle. Two more straps met at his waist, and he fastened them like a belt. Callum’s mouth gaped in amazement as Katock lifted the heavy crate off the ground. There was some strain on the pactrid’s face as he straightened, but once he stood and lumbered back and forth a few times across the warehouse, it was clear he could carry the weight. Judging by Katock’s expression, he was enjoying Callum’s astonishment.

With a grunt, the pactrid carefully lowered the crate to the ground again and unfastened the straps. “There’s no question our backs will be bruised by the end of our trek, but the weight is acceptable.” He gazed back at the line of crates. “I gave you this task specifically to test your mettle. Normally, this duty is assigned to two members. That you managed it on your own, as a human, has left me deeply impressed. You’ve proved yourself more than worthy to be part of our vanguard.”

Callum bowed his head. “Thank you.”

“You’re dismissed for the remainder of the day,” Katock said, gesturing at the warehouse’s exit. “Rest well, for we will be leaving tomorrow at first light.”

Shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun, Callum wandered through the settlement. The workshop bustled with activity, but he wasn’t sure what they were doing. Poking his head in, he found a number of pactrids building more crates. One worker caught him snooping. Callum tentatively waved in greeting, and the pactrid returned the wave with a smile before turning back to his work.

Despite his attempts, Callum had a terrible time learning all their names. To his ear, they remained exotic and strange. And it

didn't help that, at a glance, they all looked similar to him. But he knew, in time, he'd come to learn their names and faces. He could already spot Cior, Katock, and Eudald in a crowd. And, of course, Rym.

Callum pondered where his friend was. Presumably busy with his own tasks. Not wanting to intrude any further, Callum headed north past the barracks and toward the western cliffs. Although he didn't have an escort, all the pactrids knew him now, and Katock said the rule could be safely broken here.

Each day, Callum visited the cliffs to marvel how the beach gradually expanded out as the water receded. From the bottom of the cliff, the sandy shore descended with a pronounced slope. It was so different from Anbera, where the seabed was flat as far as the eye could see.

The waves, now distant, were far less violent. And instead of the water pounding chaotically, there was a clear pull southward—following the setting moon. Tomorrow, the sea would be gone. Callum's belly lurched nervously at the prospect of the journey. He'd reckoned his new life had begun upon leaving Anbera, but that felt like a precursor now. What he was about to embark on meant there was little chance of returning to this land again.

EIGHT

The Sea

Sleep continued to evade Callum. His mind wandered aimlessly—filled with incessant musings of unknown danger that could befall the vanguard. Imagining a grisly end of being caught by the sea, torn asunder. It wasn't until the early morning hours that he finally nodded off, only to be awakened by a gentle nudge. Lamplight revealed half of Rym's face, the other half lost to stark shadow. His large hand sat on Callum's chest, rubbing softly.

"It's time to go, pup," he whispered.

Callum scrubbed at his face, groaning at the prospect of getting up when his body yearned for more rest. Presenting a knowing smile, Rym left to give him a moment to waken. Callum pulled the sheet away with a sigh and turned to get out of bed. His tall rucksack leaned against the wall, near to bursting with his only possessions and the extra provisions. Everything was ready. All he needed to do was get dressed, shoulder his belongings, and start walking. *You'll be fine once you're up.*

After a few minutes of inward complaining, he managed to follow through with the simple task, and jumped the short distance down from the barracks exit. The faintest hint of red hues lit the

eastern tree-laden horizon, while some of the brighter stars still twinkled in the western sky. Dewdrops hung heavy on the long grass. The seabed, now devoid of water, fell away in a descending series of gentle slopes—falling to blackness in the dim light. Callum shuddered at the foreign sight.

Trills and warbles of early songbirds echoed from the trees. The crash of the sea had always overwhelmed them before. Their cheerful song—ignorant of the dangerous journey the vanguard was about to embark upon—strengthened Callum's courage. As always, Eudald caught Callum's attention with a dour stare. It was especially strong this morning, but once his feelings were made clear, he ignored Callum completely.

The twelve entered the warehouse that stored the prepared crates. Tightening the leather straps and buckles, each lifted their heavy burdens. Some stood with no trouble at all, whereas a few others—such as Cior—required a little help to steady themselves. However, once accustomed to the weight, the twelve pactrids stepped outside, surefooted and ready to proceed.

Katock addressed the crowd. "Cior has studied the map provided to us and produced his own copy. While I am still the leader of this vanguard, we will defer to Cior in all aspects of way-finding and navigation. Is that understood?"

The vanguard grunted in acknowledgement.

"Our destination is northwest of our location," Cior said, "but it's not a direct route. Obstacles in our way will force us to take an indirect path."

"Any questions?" Katock asked.

Callum had too many. None that required an answer, of course, only idle musings to help tamp down his hesitation. Surely he'd learn everything he'd want to know in the coming days.

None of the other pactrids spoke up, so Katock raised a hand and signalled to move out. "Very well. Let us begin."

He and Cior took the lead onto the narrow forest path. Each member followed in single-file fashion, disappearing under the dark canopy. Rym gestured for Callum to fall in line, and the pactrid followed behind. They trod their way down the zigzagging switchback trail. In contrast to the crashing waves two days ago, the stark quiet now made this place feel unfamiliar.

Upon reaching the beach, they negotiated around the fallen trees ravaged by the sea. The way ahead seemed no less foreboding

from this position. A never-ending succession of sandy escarpments lay before him, each one plunging further into the earth.

“How deep does this go?” Callum pondered aloud.

Rym could only shrug in reply, then gave Callum a comforting pat on the shoulder.

The group spread out as they descended, finding it easier to step on freshly packed sand rather than trailing within the footsteps of their fellows. As the sun rose, its light reached a foggy horizon before finally hitting their backs. The fog ahead was no better than the darkness from before, and Callum found himself filled with an impatient longing to know what lay beyond. To his left and right was the same immeasurable, declining slope. Looking back the way they’d come and shielding his eyes from the sun, he stumbled in shock to discover how deep they already were. To know this vast abyss was recently filled with seawater prompted a sense of trepidation—once again aware they didn’t belong here.

As the morning wore on, rocky formations—black and craggy—emerged from the sand like a lost, buried city. The terrain’s steep angle began to level out, and in the distance, the tall rock pillars appeared to block their way forward. The sand under their feet thinned to reveal dark bedrock. This made for easier travel, and the team could pick up speed.

With the advancing pillars blocking their way, Cior led the vanguard northward to walk alongside them. The formations were unlike anything Callum had seen before. Rather than solid stone, they were comprised of intricate, interconnected webs. At the right angle, he could even see through them. Reaching out, he felt the texture of the surface, but an unexpected sensation had him immediately pull back. His finger was cut—not deep, but enough to draw blood. The edges of the pillars were jagged, like an unbroken line of serrated teeth.

To the east was the sandy slope upward, back to where land resided. Only now, the land had disappeared from view. The rising, undulating, sandy contours seemed to touch the blue sky. Callum couldn’t help but remain astonished by the bizarre landscape they travelled across.

As the falling sun drew long shadows from the rock pillars, those formations began to falter. It was as though a colossal fist had swept across from above, breaking the structures with ease. Remnants of broken stone filled what small gaps remained between

the pillars, making it impossible to traverse had they been forced to take a route through.

Luckily, the northern trail they'd been travelling remained clear. And by day's end, the pillars had all but dwindled away, finally providing the vanguard a more direct northwestern route. The bedrock was far from flat, however, requiring careful navigation around trapped pools of seawater.

Once the sun was nearly kissing the skyline, Katock ordered the vanguard to prepare to rest for the night. An audible groan of relief filled the air as each member crouched down to unstrap themselves from their heavy burden. Rym rubbed his shoulders, grimacing.

"I have something that might help your pain," Callum said in a hushed tone, "but I don't have enough for everyone."

Rym offered a grateful smile. "Thank you, pup, but I can deal with this for now. Keep it until there's a true need."

The vanguard broke into smaller groups as they set up camp, such as it was—bedrolls under the stars. Knowing there'd be no wood for a fire, Callum made a point of packing a warm blanket.

"Rymolnd, Cal'oom," Katock called out. "Come join Cior and I."

They accepted their invitation, crossing by a small pool of water.

"I've often wondered what seawater tastes like," Callum said as they sat down. "I know it's salty, but how bad could it be?"

This brought on a rumble of laughter from the other three.

"Why not try it?" Katock said teasingly.

Four labourers sitting nearby overheard the conversation and turned to watch the outcome with droll grins—curious to see how the event would play out. Callum looked to Rym for counsel, but the pactrid only stared back, waggling his brows with a smirk. He'd never been one to give into peer pressure, but the weight upon him now felt palpable. Rising to his feet, he ambled over to the pool and ran his fingers over the surface. Glancing back to both groups yielded no more insight, but it was clear following through would end in laughter. If it was all in fun, though, he didn't mind. Scooping water into his palm, he gave it a sniff, finding it surprisingly odourless.

"Use two hands," one labourer said. "You'll want a mouthful of water."

Before giving it a second thought, Callum followed the instructions and slurped, only to immediately spit out once the brackish water touched his tongue. Raucous laughter rose from the two groups, followed by applause.

Callum couldn't help joining in the laughter. "How can it be that salty?" he demanded, spitting again in an attempt to clear his mouth.

"Now you understand the reason to carry fresh water," Rym said, reaching out for Callum to sit beside him.

Confused by the commotion, the third group watched from a distance, and Eudald caught Callum's eye. The soldier's frown spoke of displeasure—possibly jealousy?—that Callum had provoked laughter amongst the vanguard. The glance, though fleeting, felt like an eternity to Callum as he locked eyes with the surly pactrid. As much as Callum wanted to befriend the entire vanguard, he knew there was no way to please Eudald. If the rest of the crew had no problem having a human amongst them, that was good enough for him.

The air cooled noticeably once the sun had fallen below the horizon, however the bedrock—having baked in the sun all day—emanated a surprising amount of warmth. It couldn't compare to snuggling against Rym, but Callum could wait. He knew once they'd reached the new land, there would be plenty of opportunity to be close to his friend. The anticipation brought on by their impending journey had finally broken, allowing Callum to fall asleep effortlessly. No doubt the exertion of the day played a part as well.

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Bedrock plains, boundless in all directions, made for a monotonous trek the next day. The huff and strain of carrying such heavy loads left the vanguard bereft of conversation. More than once, a member had nearly tripped on the uneven stone, however the groups were gathered close enough to catch each other in the event someone fell.

The unchanging landscape continued into the third day. Callum pondered the idea of discovering a vast precipice—an endless void beyond that would force them to stop. *This couldn't go*

on forever, could it? Dark, menacing clouds loomed from the north, approaching the vanguard. At this point, he welcomed it. Anything to alter the uneventful few days would be appreciated.

Once the storm hit, however, he swiftly renounced his wish. Violent wind lashed at his face, pulling at his rucksack, trying to knock him down. Then the rain arrived. Instead of falling, it flew at the vanguard horizontally, attempting to blind them.

"Keep on!" Katock hollered over the maelstrom. "Slow and steady!"

The leader's advice was taken to heart. Their footing on the bedrock became perilously slippery. Callum positioned himself clear of the surrounding members. The accumulated weight of a pactrid carrying a crate would easily crush him.

In any other situation, the sane decision would've been to seek shelter and wait out the storm, but the rocky plains offered no such protection. And progress, however sluggish, was better than none. They couldn't afford to waste time. The Roaming Sea would wait for no one.

One benefit of a fierce storm was that they never lasted long, and this storm was no different. Within fifteen minutes, the wind had died down, and what rain remained was a gentle patter. The continued march in sodden clothes with the heavy rucksack on his back reminded Callum of his days at the academy. During basic training, they said tough conditions made for tough soldiers. Instructors would use any opportunity to create arduous situations for the recruits to suffer through. Even at that young age, Callum could appreciate their reasoning, but reckoned being in the middle of an active battlefield was enough encouragement to toughen even the meekest soldier. Thinking back to that moment now, he could only shake his head at such ignorance.

By late afternoon, the sun had returned in force, providing a few appreciative hours to aid in drying their damp clothing. That night was cold and uncomfortable, yet Callum still managed to sleep soundly after an hour of tossing and turning.

Noontide of the fourth day brought something new to the western vista, causing the vanguard to exclaim in wonder. A line of rock jutted out into the sky, like a giant scar through the incessant plains. Beyond the line revealed dangerous, ragged terrain—a maze of peaks and valleys.

Cior pulled the map free from his breast jacket pocket. "This is

one area where our wayfinder expeditions are working to locate shorter routes." He pointed north. "For now, though, we must go around."

Without a point of reference, it was impossible to properly ascertain the grandeur of the ruined bedrock before them. Only upon reaching the base could they appreciate the towering structure —almost like a mountain range. Large fissures broke through the ridgeline, allowing access to the possibility of a shortcut Cior mentioned. Callum contemplated the bravery of those pactrids tasked to explore there. The potential of becoming lost or trapped was considerably high.

Continuing north, the vanguard steered around bluffs and gullies. Sunlight fell behind the peaks, drawing lengthening shadows across the flat bedrock to the east. That didn't stop Katock, however. He kept them marching until the sky was reduced to dark blues and purples, finally halting the troop upon spotting a flat area suitable to camp for the night.

A series of nooks recessed into the ragged stone walls provided more privacy than their previous nights, allowing the members to use them as makeshift privies. Callum had to travel a little farther along the line to find one for himself. Once he'd completed his business, he popped out of the recess to find a silhouette blocking his way back to camp. The dim light was no help to reveal who it was.

"Rym?" Callum asked meekly.

"No," a voice rasped. It was Eudald.

Callum swallowed. "I don't want trouble. I don't mean you any harm."

"You say that, but I don't believe you. I know the truth. Hate guides the human heart. You've fooled them all, but not me."

"I understand why you feel this way—"

"You understand?" Even in the dark, it was clear Eudald was speaking through clenched teeth. "You understand nothing, human. You cannot appreciate the pain and suffering your kind has caused us. You force us to leave our home in order to survive. You do not belong amongst us."

As the soldier spoke, Callum tried to skirt his way around. But with each step, Eudald moved to block his advance. Callum considered running or yelling for help, but fear of what Eudald might do in response kept him from following through. Reasoning

with the soldier felt like his only option, but Callum wondered if he could determine the correct words to uncover Eudald's empathy. Did the soldier have any empathy left to give?

"I never wanted this war," Callum said. "Even as a child, I felt it was wrong."

"You're still a child."

"Maybe to your eyes I am, but that makes no difference. I'm a medic for a reason. I want to heal, not hurt."

Eudald's looming silhouette remained silent.

"You need to understand the humans in power told us terrible lies. They said pactrids were invading our land, and we needed to defend it. When Rym told me the truth, *showed* me the truth through his eyes, I wept."

"You want tears? I'll show you the *real* truth!"

The soldier advanced upon him, closing the space with terrifying speed. Callum cried out, a wordless bleat that echoed off the craggy ridge. Before he could pull his knife free—a futile weapon against such a foe, but it was all he had—Eudald slammed his hands onto Callum's head.

A blinding flash of light stunned Callum and he collapsed. Burning, acrid vapours overwhelmed his senses. Eudald's grip remained firm, holding him down, but Callum was only vaguely aware of his surroundings. Scattered images, from Eudald to Callum, tore across his vision. A glint of sunlight off a sword's keen edge. Countless Anberan soldiers encircling him, overpowering and knocking him down—clambering atop him like savage animals. His wild thrashing did nothing to hold them at bay. Hands ripped off his protective armour. Stabbing and slashing. So much blood.

As violently as they came, the visions ended. Callum lay on his side, blind, groping in the dark, gasping for breath. The sound of violence continued, however. Meaty, wet wallops assaulted his ears. Savage grunts of effort came with each blow. Overlapping yells, difficult to comprehend, grew louder as they approached. Callum's vision returned, but he struggled to make out details of the unfolding melee due to the oppressive gloom. One pactrid sat on the chest of another, throwing wild punches at an unguarded face.

"Stop this immediately!" Katock bellowed as he charged at them, pulling the assailant off his victim.

"No!" Rym cried, trying to free himself from Katock's grip.

A lone lantern swung frantically, throwing stark shadows

before breaking through the throng of onlookers to light the area. One labourer aided Katock in controlling Rym's flailing arms, while another reached Eudald to assess the damage. The soldier moaned incoherently at the touch. Having regained his wits, Callum crawled backward before stumbling against someone's feet. It was Cior. The scout crouched down to help Callum stand on wobbly legs.

"What happened?" Cior whispered.

"Eudald. He—" Callum groaned as another flash of blinding light filled his vision. The smell of burning in his nostrils persisted, followed by sharp splinters of pain in his head. Cior sat him down again, using a steady hand to hold him.

"I told you to stay away from him."

"He cornered me. He touched my head, showed me things."

"He performed a *gutach* on you?" Cior asked.

It wasn't until Cior spoke the word did Callum remember it, and he nodded. His experience with Rym's shared vision was nothing like this. Rym's touch had been heedful, his visions soft and gentle.

"How do you feel?" Cior asked.

"Headache."

"Fear not, Cal'oom. It will pass shortly." The scout laid a tender hand atop Callum's head, causing him to flinch. It was only after a moment Callum realised the touch was meant to soothe him, nothing more.

The labourer helped Eudald to sit up. Blood marred the soldier's face. Rym had finally calmed down enough to allow Katock a moment to judge Eudald's condition. The leader then turned a dark gaze upon Callum.

"What did you do to provoke Eudald?"

Cior replied before Callum could state his case. "The human did nothing. What happened here was due to my poor judgement. I knew of Eudald's mistrust of the human. However, after speaking to him and Cal'oom, I thought they would keep their distance."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Cior hung his head down. "I felt the matter was dealt with and didn't want to trouble you."

Katock turned his attention to Eudald. "Our first meeting, I asked you if the human would be a problem, and you said no. Explain your actions."

The soldier turned his head to spit blood. "Humans don't

deserve to be amongst us. We're escaping their kind, yet one travels with us? This makes no sense."

"You know this human is different," Katock said. "He was cleared by a *gotachi*. He has the pass—"

"He could've stolen it," Eudald cried.

"No, he didn't," Rym said. "I was there when the *gotachi* gave it to Cal'oom. He passed the test. He proved his worth."

Katock nodded. "I also tested Cal'oom's worth to be part of our vanguard, and he did not disappoint me." He gestured to the pactrids around him. "I ask you all. Has this human ever given you pause, shown ill motive toward us?"

The members glanced at each other, then shook their heads in reply.

"And you, Eudald. Tell me what this human has done to you to deserve such hate."

"He's *human*!" the soldier bellowed, bloody spittle flying. "He doesn't belong amongst us."

Katock let out an audible sigh and turned his gaze back to Cior. "I'm incredibly disappointed you never told me this. Had I known, I would've barred Eudald from joining."

Livid, the soldier tried to stand but instead fell to his knees. "You'd bar me instead of this *asafari*?"

"Watch your tone!" Katock growled. "This human has shown qualities worth admiring. Your blind hate makes you ugly. If we were closer to the settlement, I would order you to leave."

Callum couldn't believe what he was hearing. He knew Eudald would never completely trust him, but he was hoping they'd come to some kind of truce over time. Now, that felt impossible.

Hearing Katock's words, Eudald stared back in utter disbelief. He turned to regard his comrades, seeking support, but found none. Realisation drew across his bloody face, as though he were questioning everything he believed.

The silence was deafening.

Despite everything, Callum couldn't help but feel pity for the soldier. Eudald's hate, while misguided, was founded in truth. A small part within Callum now understood that hate. The soldier's visions had shown he'd nearly died. How had he escaped such a dire situation? It didn't matter. The damage, both mental and physical, was done. That tragic moment had sown a deep hatred—a toxic seed—that would likely live within Eudald until his death.

“Can you stand?” Cior asked.

“I think so,” Callum replied, allowing the scout to help him up.

Treading a wide arc to keep his distance from the soldier, Rym approached them. “Are you hurt?”

Subtle remnants of stabbing pain caused Callum to rub his temples, and Cior replied for him. “Eudald performed an aggressive *gutach* upon him.”

Rym glanced back at the soldier with bared teeth. “I should’ve killed him,” he muttered.

“Don’t say that,” Callum said. “It makes you no better than him.”

Rym stared long and hard, considering his words. Even in the dim light, his silver eyes sparkled.

“Still,” Callum continued, “I appreciate you saving me.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t arrive sooner.”

Rym reached out to comfort him, however Callum took his hand to inspect the damage. His knuckles were torn and bloodied.

“Let me treat this for you,” Callum said.

The pactrid offered an elusive smile. “Very well, medic Cal’oom.”

Even though the vanguard members disagreed with Eudald’s behaviour and sentiment toward Callum, it didn’t leave them heartless. The twelve returned to camp as a group, with two aiding the soldier back to his bedroll.

“I should help Eudald as well,” Callum whispered to Cior and Rym as he lit a lantern. “It’s my responsibility.”

Cior scoffed at Callum’s determination to do right, then shook his head. “You are an equal part of this vanguard, yet he assaulted you. Let him suffer as punishment for his actions.”

“I’m sorry you got in trouble, Cior. I hope Katock won’t be angry for long.”

The scout bestowed a gracious bow of the head, then looked to Rym. “You are a lucky one. Try to get some rest, my friends.”

“And you,” Rym replied, watching Cior return to his bedroll while Callum dug out medical supplies from his rucksack.

“Show me your hand,” Callum said.

Rym complied, stretching out his fingers palm down to reveal the damage. Pouring a small amount of his drinking water onto a cloth, Callum dabbed at Rym’s hand, wiping away the now drying blood. Some of it belonged to Rym, some not.

“Sometimes I wonder if I deserve you,” Rym murmured.

A smile broke across Callum’s lips. “You’re the one who saved me, remember?” He popped open a vial, catching a whiff of its antiseptic properties, then poured an ample amount onto a clean section of cloth. “This will sting.”

Once again, he gently dabbed at the open wound. Rym sucked in air through his teeth, but his hand remained still while Callum worked. Gauze was wrapped across his wide hand, then looped around his fingers to keep it tight against his skin.

“You’re a good patient,” Callum said as he tied it off and patted the pactrid’s wrist.

Making a fist to test the bandage’s flexibility, Rym replied, “You’re a fine medic.”

“Anyone could’ve done that.”

“Having you accomplish the task makes it special to me. Thank you.”

Callum winced as another spur of pain shot through his head.

“I’m sorry you had to endure that, pup.”

“Cior said it would stop soon.”

“It will.” Rym lay down on his bedroll, patting for Callum to join him, then doused the lantern.

The dim glow of other lanterns nearby and the hushed tone of conversation amongst the others made it feel—if just for a moment—they weren’t resting at the bottom of a seabed. Callum snuggled close, and a strong hand held him tight against Rym’s body.

Oh, how I’ve missed this.

Knowing the others were likely aware of this show of intimacy brought a small sting of embarrassment, but it was swiftly overpowered by his want—his need—for Rym’s touch. Callum knew that, by this point, their relationship wasn’t a secret. It baffled him that none appeared surprised or disgusted by their pairing.

“What did Eudald show you?” Rym asked, his deep voice rumbling through Callum.

The question brought the violent imagery back to the forefront, turning his stomach. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I understand. Sleep, pup. I’ll keep you safe.”

Callum’s heart sang, and his eyes stung with tears. *Please, never let me go.*

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Heavy, grey fog blanketed the vanguard the next morning. As they set forth on the day's journey, ragged shapes revealed themselves from the bedrock scar—emerging from the mist like giant hands greeting them. The group's muted voices echoed strangely against the stone, bouncing once before disappearing into the thick haze. The rising sun helped to melt the disconcerting fog away, and within a few hours, they were met again by bright, blue skies.

They travelled north along the scar's edge for most of the day. Rym and Callum made a point to keep clear of Eudald's vicinity, however Callum managed to catch a glimpse of the soldier. Dark purple bruises overwhelmed his grey skin, and one eye was nearly swollen shut. Remorse bubbled to the surface at the sight of it. Callum tried to tamp it down, but found himself unwilling and unable.

Ahead, the scar ended abruptly, revealing layers of eroded hills streaked with iridescent seams. They glimmered in the evening light. Once again, such a drastic change in the landscape had the vanguard express their excitement with shouts and laughter. The topography would also allow them to travel the preferred northwestern route, heartening the group all the more. Despite the thrill of viewing such a rare sight, Callum found the bare terrain cold and uninviting. He longed to hear the rush of wind through the trees—to take in the warm and welcoming green. Such sights and sounds were still far away, though. The vanguard had reached the end of the fifth day of travel, and there was still a long trek ahead of them. *At least we're halfway there.*

The following day, the gentle curve of the hills invited the travellers to approach. Traversing those stony rises, however, killed any enthusiasm held by the vanguard. They were much more steep than they appeared from afar. Cior tried his best to lead them toward clefts for more gentle inclinations, but often, he was fooled by illusions caused by shadow and light.

Cresting each hill revealed a seemingly unending landscape of mounds. Into the seventh day, Cior kept referring to his simple map with growing concern, then spoke in hoarse whispers to Katock. Having caught this, Rym drew near to discuss the issue privately. The other members quickly caught on, and Cior turned to address

them.

"My friends, it pains me to tell you—we may be lost."

An uproar surged from the crowd.

"Quiet!" Katock's booming voice commanded. "There is nothing to gain by losing discipline."

Cior nodded to the leader before continuing. "According to the map, we should have reached the other side of these hills by now. Either we've travelled too far west or north. There's no way to be sure—only a narrow stretch of land has been charted."

"You can't be serious!" one labourer cried.

"You knew the risks, Qarrj," Katock said. "We're called a vanguard for a reason. Now, don't lose hope. I've read the reports from previous groups. We're not the first to fall off course yet still reach land safely. Cior, please explain the issue."

The scout approached the group to show everyone the map. "Our problem now is that the land we're aiming for is narrow. If we travel too far north, we could miss it entirely. The same is true if we travel too far west. This is why we've always been aiming northwest. It's the most direct route and gives us the best chance to stay on course." Cior let out a deep sigh. "But at the moment, I can't be certain if we should continue our northwestern direction. By doing so, it's possible we'll overshoot our destination."

An unsettled murmur grew from the members as they inspected the map.

Cior looked to Rym and Tulenk, a junior scout. "I would appreciate your input."

Rym surveyed the landscape, turning in a circle for any indication of where they could be in relation to the map, then shook his head. "The area is too broad with no distinguishing waymarks. Our expertise is of no use here."

Tulenk nodded sullenly in agreement, then glanced at Katock. "Perhaps we should vote as a group?"

The leader grimaced at the suggestion. "You are all my responsibility. My job is to lead you safely to land. I shouldn't have to defer such an important decision to you, but I also don't want you to feel like I'm dragging you to your death." He turned to Cior. "Give us our options."

Cior regarded the map again with uncertainty. "Either we continue northwest or we go straight north. I feel going directly west would be a death sentence. Once we clear these hills, I hope to

find flat bedrock. After that, sand—that means land is near."

"Very well," Katock said. "Give me a show of hands to continue northwest."

The majority of hands went up, including Callum and Rym. Callum wasn't about to call himself an expert map reader, but judging by what he saw, continuing northwest made sense.

"You all made it easy to decide, then," the leader said. "We're wasting light, team. Let's move."

As much as everyone hoped to escape the hills that afternoon, the undulating seabed still continued unabated by day's end. A bleak cloud of despair hung over the camp—each member aloof and untalkative. Callum slept fitfully. Nightmares of drowning overwhelmed him, causing him to bolt awake, gasping for air.

Leaden skies echoed the vanguard's mood on the morning of the eighth day. They trudged onward, but with each passing hour, what dwindling hope that remained was all but snuffed out. They had roughly two days left to reach landfall. The moon would emerge from the northern skyline on the tenth day, near sunset. Its dawning would herald their demise. Callum scoffed inwardly. The rise of the moon was often an exciting event for him, and the arrival of the Roaming Sea never failed to bring a smile to his face. If they managed to escape this predicament, he would regard the moon and the sea with a differing form of appreciation—one of humbling respect.

"Ho!" Cior cried, breaking an hours-long period of silence. He levelled his arm northward. "I see a break in the hills."

Following the scout's pointed finger, everyone's gaze shifted toward the horizon. The rolling hills were indeed diminishing. The team exclaimed in relief and continued their way with rejuvenated strength. That exhilaration was short-lived, however. What lay beyond the hills wasn't bedrock plains. It was flat, but instead of pure black stone, it was riddled with mysterious light grey patches. From their distant vantage point, it was difficult to comprehend what they were seeing. Regardless, Katock ordered the team to continue north. At this point, anything was better than the tiring hills.

Once they'd reached the final rise, the cause of the strange patches became clear. They were pools of trapped water—countless, undefined forms that continued beyond the horizon—reflecting perfectly against the grey sky. While Katock and the members

marched on, Cior pulled his map free from his inner jacket pocket, then sagged in dismay.

"We're still off course," he said to Callum and Rym as they approached. "These waters were never mapped."

"Maybe the trenches are shallow and water doesn't always collect there," Callum replied, however even he wasn't convinced by his suggestion.

Cior's head fell limp, and he shut his eyes. "I've failed my duty."

"You haven't failed yet, scout," Rym said. "This territory is vast, and any vanguard is bound to lose their way sometimes. Let's keep moving."

The bodies of water varied in size, from ponds to minuscule lakes. No matter the proportions, their surface remained unsettlingly crystal clear. Not even a tiny ripple marred their veneer. Callum touched the surface to confirm that, yes, it was water. Due to the black bedrock, their depth remained unknown, but peering through the reflective glass felt like staring into an unfathomable abyss. Narrow tracts between the basins forced the vanguard to travel in pairs. Divining the best way forward wasn't a simple task, either. Sometimes the labyrinthine path doubled back on itself, wasting precious time.

Breaking clouds to the west allowed the setting sun to make its first appearance of the day. Fiery reds and golds illuminated the underside of the clouds, mesmerising the vanguard as they set up camp for the night. The water mirrored those same resplendent colours. It should have been beautiful, but for Callum, he found the innumerable pools somehow distressing.

When he voiced his concern to Rym, the pactrid softly replied, "We are all feeling on edge, pup. Morale is low. Your nervousness is justified." He then looked down, unable to hold his gaze upon Callum. "Don't worry. We'll make it."

For the first time, Callum felt sure Rym was lying to him. It wasn't malicious, surely, but it still left a sour taste in his mouth. He didn't want platitudes, he wanted Rym's honest thoughts—even if they were dire. *Maybe he just wants to believe it.*

In the middle of the night, Callum was abruptly awakened. Something had woken him. A curious sound—perhaps lapping water. He rose, trying to distinguish anything amidst the shroud of darkness engulfing the vanguard. The sky, now free of cloud cover,

shimmered with winking stars. Innumerable exquisite tiny gems reflected in the still pools around the sleeping vanguard. Ears perked, he waited patiently to catch the sound again. Aside from gentle snoring, he heard nothing. *Maybe it was a dream?*

He lay down and closed his eyes again, willing himself back to sleep. However, moments before sinking back to slumber, lapping water brought him back. He leapt up, swinging his head left and right, trying to pinpoint the source. In one pool, the stars wavered.

He nudged Rym, whispering, "Wake up."

The pactrid let out a muffled grunt as he roused from sleep. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know, but there's movement in the water."

"The wind?"

The air was still. "It's only in one pool," he replied, pointing.

Lifting himself up on one arm, Rym looked toward Callum's concern. The ripples were gone—the surface smooth.

"Go to sleep, pup."

A giant shape broke from the surface, flying into the air and landing atop one of the sleeping pactrids. Water followed in its wake, splashing those nearby, and a foul, sulphurous reek wafted out.

Rym was immediately on his feet. "Awake, everyone. We're being attacked!"

Confusion and chaos overcame the group. Starlight did little to reveal what had leapt out of the water. The black shape—its skin wet and slick—writhed atop the ambushed pactrid, who was screaming in panic. Without hesitation, Callum scurried to his rucksack to retrieve his bow. It was unstrung, of course, and his lack of skill to prime it became quickly apparent.

The two soldiers, Eudald and Ignasi, pulled their swords free and fell upon the unknown assailant. A lantern was hastily lit, followed by another, allowing the members to stare in horror as the soldiers hacked and slashed. The stark lamplight didn't yield a clue what the shape was. Their blades only grazed the surface of its dark, greasy skin. Others tried to pull the pactrid free of its grip, but to no avail.

"It's got my leg!" the pactrid cried. Hearing his voice, Callum recognised it as Tulenk, the junior scout.

Callum continued to fumble with his bow, trying to bend the supple wood far enough to string it, but it kept slipping from his

grip. Undeniably, the terror unfolding before him was no help.

Tulenk's screams rose in urgency. "It's biting my leg! Help!"

Eudald and Ignasi redoubled their efforts, resorting to recklessly hacking at the blob. Slimy tendrils—perhaps its blood—drew forth, covering their blades in a viscous sludge. Eudald tried to wipe his sword clean, but the slime clung on earnestly like thick wax, blunting the sharp edge of his blade.

At last, Callum secured the bowstring, then snatched his quiver of arrows. During practise, he only used a few arrows, knowing if he ever needed to shoot an actual target, he wanted sharp arrowheads and solid shafts. In the near dark, however, it was impossible to know which were virgin arrows.

"Stand back," he shouted.

It only took a moment for all eyes to fall to him. Immediately understanding Callum's request, Katock bellowed the order to fall back. Everyone stepped away, reluctantly leaving Tulenk prone on the ground, reaching out with both hands. His cries, near hysterical, tore deep into Callum's being. With a deep breath, Callum pulled the bowstring taut, as far as his strength allowed, then released. The arrow flew the short distance and hit the blob square and true, sinking deep into its foetid and murky flesh. Finally, it reacted—flattening and spreading out, akin to flexing a muscle in an attempt to dislodge the arrow.

The two soldiers used this new insight to their advantage, abandoning their swords for daggers. They plunged their blades deep, stabbing viciously in hopes the blob would free the scout from its tenacious grip. It didn't take long for its blood to cover their daggers, however, and their once keen edge ineffectually slipped against the monster's skin. Rym, Katock, and two others pulled their own daggers to take their place, and Callum shot another arrow between them.

Their concerted efforts forced the black shape to shift and slide off Tulenk. As soon as the scout's leg was free, he clambered away on his belly as quickly as he could. Two labourers helped him up, and with arms over shoulders, carried him away from the immediate threat.

"Don't let it escape," Katock ordered as the blob slithered toward the safety of the pool it had emerged from.

Members surrounded it, attempting to kick it away from the water. Eudald scrambled to recover his dropped sword, then slipped

it under the shape. Using the blade as leverage, he flipped the shape onto its back, revealing a terrible, gaping maw. The terrible reek multiplied, causing a few to gag. Callum had another arrow nocked, and used that moment to loose it into the shape's mouth. A wet, guttural moan—harrowing yet mournful—expelled from its lips. Then it shuddered and fell still.

Each member watched with nervous energy, readying themselves to resume the attack, but the only sound now was Tulenk's strained gasps of pain. Callum glanced over to the fallen scout. His trouser leg was shredded and bloodied. The labourers had him lying down, trying their best to comfort him. Dropping his bow and quiver, Callum dug through the contents of his rucksack to fetch his medical bag of supplies.

"I need more light," Callum said as he approached the injured scout.

The second lantern was brought over by Katock, allowing Callum to better inspect the damage. He gently pulled away the torn fabric of Tulenk's trousers to reveal his calf pockmarked with deep punctures and gashes. While the shape hadn't exposed any teeth during its death rattle, there must've been something sharp down its gullet. Callum was relieved to see no major blood vessels were hit, however. The blood still oozing from the scout's wounds would halt with treatment.

"I need clean water," Callum said.

In moments, a large waterskin was thrust at him, and he accepted it with thanks. He poured water gently over the wounds, but made no effort to ration it. What pain this caused Tulenk appeared manageable. He grimaced and groaned, but otherwise held still. Callum wiped the calf clean, then prepared another cloth for the next step. His vial of disinfectant was nearly full, but he had no doubt it would be empty once he'd finished. The scout's meaty calf was huge, and there were many wounds to treat.

He regarded the scout with a grim eye. "I'm sorry, Tulenk, but this is going to hurt. I'll try to finish quickly, but there's a lot of damage here."

With knitted brows and bared teeth, Tulenk nodded. "Do it."

Callum fell to task, trying to ignore the anguished cries and grunts his work was causing. The labourers held Tulenk tightly, offering sympathetic words of encouragement. Katock held the lantern close, angling it as needed while Callum treated his patient.

Long minutes passed uncounted. Tulenk continued to bear the pain as best he could. In fact, by the time Callum was almost complete, the scout had calmed considerably. Fresh sweat still beaded upon Tulenk's brow, but his ragged breathing had eased. And all the while, the labourers provided all the compassionate support they could muster.

"The worst is done," Callum said. "I only need to bandage it now."

Tulenk visibly sagged, letting out a long sigh, and one labourer gave the scout a hearty clap on the shoulder. Callum dressed the leg tightly with gauze, having just enough to complete the job.

"Thank you, everyone, for your help," Callum said while stowing what paltry supplies he had left back into his medical bag.

A scoff from Katock had Callum glance up in surprise. All eyes were set on him, and he craned his neck to discover none of the twelve pactrids were smiling. Each face bore down on him, and had he not known better, would've assumed he'd done something terribly wrong.

No.

They regarded him with profound expressions of recognition and acceptance. Even Eudald, with a sidelong glance from his bruised face, regarded Callum with a look of begrudging respect. The focus of the twelve, strong as it was, only compounded how serious they were. Callum had fallen under Rym's similar gaze many times before, but at this moment, he felt overwhelmed by the deference given by the vanguard surrounding him.

Finally, Katock spoke. "We are the ones who should thank *you*, medic Cal'oom. You are a credit to your kind. It is their great loss and our benefit that you are here, amongst us."

"But . . ." Chagrined, Callum regarded each member around him in confusion. "I was only doing my part. Why would you treat me differently?"

"Because you are a rare human. You've shown attributes few of us have ever seen. Compassion, honour, gallantry."

"The other humans—you call them refugees—they're like me. I'm not special at all."

"That may be so, but it doesn't change our opinion of *you*, Cal'oom. Your actions this night solidify my words spoken when Eudald attacked you." Katock glared at the soldier. "Now do you see? Do you understand?"

Eudald, his expression dismal, nodded once. “You’ve given me much to think upon, leader.”

“We all understand your pain, Eudald, but you must not let it take control.”

Katock knelt before Callum and placed a heavy hand on his head.

“*Yaqawi*, Cal’oom.”

Each member in turn followed the leader’s example, repeating the same word. Even Eudald took part, albeit with some reluctance, but Callum was still heartened by the gesture. He knew it couldn’t have been easy for the soldier.

“Thank you,” he said softly, attempting to make eye contact.

Eudald, his lips pouted, refused to look back—instead staring over Callum’s head. But then, while stepping away, he offered a meagre nod. It was the best acknowledgement Callum could’ve hoped for.

Tulenk hobbled to approach Callum. Unlike the others, the scout wore a broad smile, placing both hands atop Callum’s head. “*Yaqawi*, my friend. Thank you.”

Wanting to strengthen that connection, Callum reached up to touch Tulenk’s hands. “I’m glad you weren’t hurt worse.”

The final member, Rym, knelt before him. His silver eyes sparkled in the dim lamplight, gazing deeply, then he placed a hand onto Callum’s head.

“*Yaqawi*, Cal’oom.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Rym pondered a moment, then gave a peculiar smile. “There’s no other word to describe it. Just know I’m proud of you, pup. We all are. And despite everything, know that we *will* make it safely away from this place.”

This time, Callum knew Rym spoke the truth in his heart.

• • •

The prospect of returning to sleep was hastily abandoned. Even if someone kept watch while the others slept, the pandemonium had left everyone on edge. Instead, it was decided they would travel by lamplight, though Cior voiced his concern in following this plan.

Heavy gloom lay beyond the delicate circles of light, making it impossible to distinguish which winding path would lead them away from the pools. Katock remained firm in his decision, however, stating any movement was better than nothing.

What progress they made remained ponderous, though given Tulenk's injury, the slow pace was ideal. Even with the lamplight, the black bedrock made it difficult to determine where it was safe to walk. Huddled together to optimise the light, the bulky crates on their backs limited their forward vision. Not once did anyone catch sight of ripples on the water, though, nor hear the wake of movement against the border of the trenches.

For Anberans, the sea had always been an uncharted barrier—its shrouded mystery left unknown. Given its tumultuous nature, they assumed nothing could live within its waters. In contrast, pactrids made no assumptions without a thread of evidence, but none in the vanguard expected monsters lying in wait. It was possible what attacked them had been trapped there, waiting for the sea to return.

Once the first vestiges of pre-morning light revealed the terrain before them, the team noticeably relaxed and spread out to travel at an accelerated pace. Escape from the maze of pools remained illusive, however. Cior's chosen path forced the team to weave their way forward as best they could, but it was never a direct route. Being the ninth day, this worried Callum. Presumably, gnawing doubt ate at the other members as well, but none outwardly displayed their concern. Fatigue, on the other hand, was clear as the day's blue sky. Each pactrid was bent over now, trudging ahead with their trunks hanging forward, swinging with each ponderous step. Callum was certainly suffering from fatigue as well, along with the ache of guilt that his rucksack—while near to bursting—was nowhere as heavy as the crates.

The day lingered, ceaseless and indefinite. Exhaustion's grip on the vanguard tightened with each passing hour. They could've stopped to rest, even if only for a short time, but the risk of the sun falling while lost amongst the pools kept them moving. That persistence, at long last, bore fruit in the late afternoon.

"Ho!" Cior's rough voice cracked, but his excitement was unmistakable.

He pointed toward the northern horizon. The pools of water abated, leaving only rocky plains beyond. Groans of relief burst out

from the team. For Callum, the view was equal parts gratifying and distressing. At least they'd be able to finally rest without needing someone to keep watch, but how much further would they need to travel to reach safety?

Pulling from their dwindling energy reserves, they pressed on. The pools fell behind them soon enough, yet Katock ordered the team to push a bit longer. He didn't want another chance for an ambush. The team begrudgingly agreed and dragged onward for another fifteen minutes before finally collapsing.

Callum's feet throbbed and burned. He pulled off his boots and stockings, cringing at the blisters. A few had burst, much to his dismay. With no remaining disinfectant, he resorted to clean water and gauze pads to protect the lesions. Brows furrowed in worry, Rym watched as he treated his wounds.

"Perhaps your footwear is harming more than protecting," the pactrid said.

Callum shook his head. "My feet would certainly be worse if I walked barefoot. Humans don't have the advantage of tough feet like pactrids."

He knew medical supplies lay deep in one of the twelve crates. In hindsight, marking each crate and keeping an inventory would've been a smart choice. His minor injuries couldn't justify the time and energy required to go digging now, though. And his blisters would be the furthest thing on his mind by the next evening.

Donning cleaner stockings and tying his bootlaces, Callum realised he had to stop worrying about their predicament. Either they'd make it out alive, or they wouldn't. As much as it pained him to admit, either eventuality was beyond their control. All they could do to better their odds was forge ahead. Never had he pushed himself harder—not during basic training or at the front lines.

Memories of Anbera—home, or what used to be home—suddenly overwhelmed him. Faces of his past flashed before his eyes. His mother; his dead friend, Oren, and his widowed wife, Greta; his fellow medics and doctors; his brothers; his father.

He was suddenly aware of the compass against his chest, hanging from the chain around his neck. The memory of when he'd last seen it eluded him. Upon pulling it free, it spun in a circle, gradually untangling the twisted chain. Golden sunlight reflected off the compass' surface until the spinning diminished, revealing the inscription on the back.

To find your way home.

Despite the sting of melancholy arising from the words, a smile still brushed across Callum's lips. And then, upon completing the gentle revolution, the compass revealed its needle.

It was pointing north.

His heart leapt into his throat at the sight. It had never pointed north before. Breathless, he laid it flat in his hand, and used the western setting sun to confirm his orientation. The needle settled. Yes, it was aiming north—or more accurately, slightly northeast.

"To find your way home?" he muttered in his native language.

Rym, sitting nearby, glanced over in confusion. "What are you saying?"

Callum was at a loss for words, stammering, holding out the compass for Rym to see. But of course the pactrid didn't understand the significance.

"What's wrong, pup?"

"I think this is showing us the way to land."

"How?"

Callum closed his eyes, creating a mental map of the world as he knew it. Standing in Anbera, the needle always pointed southwest. During his escape at the front lines, which were much farther south than anyone knew, it pointed more toward the west. By his account, the needle was always pointing toward the western coast to some degree. Now, it was attracted to something northward. Sitting on the seabed, it all made sense. Had the compass been pointing toward this unknown land all this time?

"I think it's pointing us to safety."

"Come. We must tell Katock and Cior."

They hustled to the leader and scout, and Callum tried his best to provide a succinct explanation without rambling. Cior held the compass, turning in a circle to watch the needle move.

"If this is to be trusted, we've travelled too far west," the scout said.

"Would that explain how we lost our way?" Katock asked.

Cior nodded eagerly, then turned to Callum. "May I keep this until our arrival?" The uncertainty and despair he'd exhibited earlier was gone. Now, confidence swelled his chest. His expression instilled a sense of conviction—that they were going to make it.

"Of course!" Callum replied.

The scout beamed his squinting smile. Callum couldn't resist

the infectious energy and grinned back. Katock called out to the vanguard and tired faces turned to meet him. As the leader explained the new development, Callum couldn't help a feeling of doubt wash over him again. What if he was wrong? What if the compass was leading them to nothing? Earlier, he thought it was broken. What if that was still the case? His belly soured as the team trumpeted a cheer for Callum to provide such a tool. Not wanting to appear unappreciative, he summoned a pale smile. Even though relying on the compass was purely speculative, he reasoned it was their best chance to reach landfall.

• • •

By first light, the vanguard was raring to move. While nobody spoke it outright, they knew that by day's end—for better or for worse—their tenday journey would be over. And if the compass was to be trusted, they'd travelled farther west than expected, making an early start a prudent choice.

Once Callum had everything prepared to leave, he approached the scout, Tulenk.

"How's your leg?" he asked.

Tulenk hopped from one foot to another, showing no pain. "It's well. Thank you, medic Cal'oom. I am in your debt."

"That's not necessary," Callum said with a timid wave. "I'm just happy there's no infection and you can walk on it. Try not to overdo it, though."

"Fall in!" Katock bellowed.

The team surrounded the leader. Cior stood by his side, holding the compass with reverence.

"I know this crossing has been difficult," Katock said, "but you've all shown strength and conviction where it matters. Let's get these supplies to our new home."

The vanguard raised their trunks, trumpeting their commitment, then strapped themselves to their crates. Regardless of the wide leather straps and belt to even the load, it was evident the heavy crates were taking a toll on the team. Rym made no attempt to hide a grimace, and Callum laid a hand on the pactrid's thigh in concern.

“When we’re done, I’ll do all I can to ease the pain you’re suffering,” Callum said.

Rym let out a deep sigh. “Thank you, pup. I fear my shoulders will look similar to your feet.”

Katock signalled to move out. With the grand expanse of flat bedrock before them, the members spread out—a chevron of pactrids and one human, with Cior leading the squad. As the morning progressed, the sun lost its fight to accumulating cloud cover. Light rain showers pattered upon them, yet their resolve remained undeterred. They soldiered on, oblivious as the showers developed to rain. For Callum, ignoring it only strengthened his determination. Perhaps they felt the same.

Ever since he’d left Anbera, it felt like he was finally doing something right. Of course, he didn’t regret his duties as a medic, but that war—that damned unending war—was all based on lies and deceit. Even after all this time, he struggled to accept it. So many dead—human and pactrid—and despite his involuntary involvement, he questioned whether he’d ever be able to forgive himself.

Callum still found himself amazed that, in spite of the Anberans’ abhorrent acts of war, the majority of pactrids didn’t resort to blind racism. Anberans had so much to learn from their objective and unselfish behaviour. And to know this vanguard—possibly even Eudald—respected Callum filled him with a sense of pride, an unfamiliar pleasure. That recognition had more worth than anything he’d experienced back in Anbera. Even just the thought of disappointing the team crushed his heart. Callum looked up to Rym. His tired friend stared forward, unaware of the formidable affection beaming from Callum’s whole being.

I hope I never let you down.

Without the sun, there was no way to judge the passing of time. To make matters more difficult, a heavy fog fell upon them. At least the rain had stopped, but the fog’s arrival had brought a plunge in temperature. Callum’s damp clothes clung to his skin, leaching what warmth he had left. The consternation he’d felt about using the compass to guide them was moot now. Without it, they’d be walking blind. The needle was leading them somewhere. It was their best chance—likely their only chance—to escape this seabed alive.

The passing hours and unchanging terrain, however, whittled

away at the vanguard's earnest tenacity. Threads of water—tiny streams—appeared at their feet, filling the narrow veins within the bedrock. Callum dipped his finger into the flowing water then lifted it up, allowing a solitary drop to touch his tongue.

"It's salty," he said.

The vanguard stopped and turned to face him.

"To what are you referring?" Katock asked.

Callum pointed at the gathering water.

"It could be salt deposits mixing with the collecting rain," Cior chimed in nervously.

Katock crouched down, carefully balancing the crate on his back, then dunked a finger into the water to taste for himself. He smacked his lips, watching the flow hasten before their eyes.

"No. The sea has arrived." He stood up and joined Cior in the lead. "Move!"

The team's gait had been brisk and steady all day. Now, they were nearly trotting. Callum winced at the renewed sting caused by his boots. *It doesn't matter. Ignore the pain. Let it bleed.* He kept pace with the others—his breathing stable, leg muscles enduring the weight without complaint. Rym had been right about all the travelling they'd accomplished. From Brookside to the vanguard settlement, and crossing the seabed itself. Pushing his body had granted the stamina he needed to keep going when it mattered most.

It didn't take long for the trickles of water to become rivulets. Soon, the seabed was submerged in a thin layer. It wasn't deep enough to restrict their movement—not yet—but the water was swelling at a daunting rate. Despite the fog, Callum had no doubt the day was nearing its end. The quality of the light had diminished —darkening—making it difficult to see.

"Ho!" Cior cried out excitedly.

The scout's familiar call brought a glimmer of hope. At first, Callum was unsure why he was pointing at the water, but then he saw it.

Sand.

Thin wisps, barely perceptible, danced and swirled in the flow of water. More accumulated as they progressed, and before long, the rocky seabed was lost to it. That didn't stop the water, of course. With each passing minute, the depth of the sea grew alarmingly fast with ever-increasing surges.

The fog, thick as it was, still thwarted their view ahead. A sudden rising contour in the sandy terrain surprised them, and climbing it brought distance from the swelling seawater. Relief-tinged laughter rose from the team, Callum included. They kept their spread-out formation so not to be troubled by the wake of footsteps in the sand.

At the beginning of the journey, their traversal down the cascading banks had been easy. In stark contrast, progression up this ascent was painfully slow. More unsettling was the audible flood of water behind them now. It was distant, but Callum knew their time was short. They had to keep climbing, or be swallowed.

The fog brightened—its colour taking on a fiery hue—as they trudged upward. Then they were hit by an abrupt shift. Their view suddenly expanded to infinity, revealing a stunning sunset to the west. They were above the fog's boundary, its voluminous surface illuminated in shades of orange and red. To the north, their destination was finally in view. They were indeed heading in the right direction. Beyond the countless ascending waves of sandbars stood a magnificent mountain peak—standing so tall that snow capped its craggy tips. The sun drew long shadows from its edges, enhancing and defining its rugged shape.

The vanguard—panting for breath from the efforts of their climb—could only grunt in amazement at the scene before them. But now was not the time to sightsee. The rush of water was growing in intensity—a continuous warning that they did not belong here. And mere minutes after they'd witnessed the sunset, the rising sea emerged from the fog. It frothed like a mad animal, snapping at their heels.

Callum's legs began to burn from the exertion. *Ignore it. Just keep climbing.* But mental willpower couldn't perpetually subdue physical fortitude. Ever gradually, each step forward became more laborious. He gasped for air, yet his lungs demanded more. The space between the twelve pactrids and himself began to spread. With their focus on reaching the shoreline, none had noticed Callum was lagging behind. He looked to his rear. The seawater still advanced—bubbling and surging—but as long as he could keep pace with it, he'd survive.

Each escarpment was a challenge, but mounting them meant they were that much closer to the shore. Callum allowed himself to fall into a trance, trying to ignore his screaming muscles. All that

mattered was to lift one foot ahead of the other, and not to trip in the fine sand. It was deep in places, requiring additional energy to pull his foot free. With concerted effort, he tried to control his ragged breathing, but that only compounded the burn in his chest.

He tripped, falling forward onto his hands and knees. To his dismay, the roiling seawater was advancing with shocking rapidity. He pushed himself back to his feet with a groan and stumbled forward. The inclination was manageable where he stood, but he questioned his ability to clamber up the next sandbar. Upon reaching it, he clawed at the sand, trying to gain purchase to pull himself onward.

"Rym," he managed to croak. "Help!"

The pactrid glanced back at the cry. Horror streaked his features to discover Callum had drifted so far behind. The others called out to Callum, imparting words of encouragement to urge him up. Rym didn't wait to determine if that would help. He bounded down the sandy bluffs—heedless of the heavy crate—crying out 'pup' every few steps in desperation.

Reaching Callum, he took his outstretched hand and effortlessly lifted him to his feet. "I'm so sorry," he said, his voice strained with worry. "I didn't realise you'd fallen behind. I thought you were with me."

Still out of breath, Callum hung onto the pactrid's leg, then risked peering at the seawater. Its familiar crash told him it was rapidly accelerating toward them. He pushed onward while Rym lumbered alongside, but the warning calls from the pactrids in the distance confirmed their pace wasn't fast enough.

"I don't want to kill us both," Callum said. "Go!"

Rym stared down at him in disbelief. "I will carry you if I must, or we die together."

Callum gestured at the crate on Rym's back. "You're already carrying too much."

Teeth bared, the pactrid yanked mightily at the leather strap around his waist—unbuckling it. Then again at his shoulders, freeing himself of his cargo. The crate smashed to the ground and tumbled toward the ever-expanding sea.

"You need that!" Callum cried out in dismay.

"You're more important!"

Rym lifted Callum up and seated him onto his wide shoulders, allowing Callum to straddle his head. Then, holding Callum's

dangling legs against his chest, the pactrid marched forward—a wide, steady gait—tireless and powerful. The vanguard ahead trumpeted with fervour at Rym's valiant rescue, but all Callum could think about was the wasted supplies. Rym had carried that heavy crate all this way for nothing, and now he was carrying *him*.

Despite Rym's firm grip on his legs, the ride was jarring, and the weight of Callum's rucksack left him feeling unbalanced, so Callum leaned forward to hug Rym's thick neck for support. His breathing had finally settled to a reasonable rate. A wave of exhaustion took its place, however, bringing lingering dizziness. This did nothing to lessen the shame coursing through him—being carried like a child to safety.

Once the team saw Rym was making significant progress, they resumed their own climb toward the shoreline. The sea roared at their backs, and Callum ventured another backward glance. He immediately wished he hadn't. The ferocious waters boiled, climbing with dreadful momentum. By his calculations, they weren't going to make it.

Regardless, Rym never looked back. His gaze remained locked toward their objective. From Callum's high vantage point, treetops were visible. His heart leapt into his throat to witness any kind of foliage after a tenday of unyielding black stone.

Rym clambered over another sandbar, giving them another few moments of extra time. They were catching up with the rest of the vanguard now. Still lugging the crates, the team was markedly slower. Callum's weight on Rym's shoulder must've felt like a feather in comparison.

"Move!" Katock bellowed, his voice barely audible over the crash of the sea.

Their show of strength and resilience was astonishing to behold. Once again, Callum felt the deep shame of inferiority. In comparison, they seemed limitless in their ability. The sea, however, was stronger still. The sand under their feet darkened as water seeped up. And in no time at all, the terrain became saturated. Each footfall splashed, spraying water into the air.

But then, the sea's advancement waned and halted. They ran headlong toward the nearing shoreline, back onto the dry sand. Callum couldn't comprehend what was happening—why the water's rise had ceased—but that didn't matter. The trees beyond the beach, now fully in view, affirmed their safety.

“We made it!” he screamed.

In reply, the vanguard roared in triumph, but there was no denying fatigue had strained their cries. Upon entering the forest—with no sand at their feet to affirm they’d be safe from the sea’s reach—each member collapsed to the ground. Leather straps were unbuckled, followed by near sobs of relief to be free of their burden.

Rym dropped to a knee and placed Callum gently on the forest floor. The scent of green—so alive—was intoxicating. He took in another breath, then looked up to his friend. Rym, his eyes closed, was still catching his breath.

Callum stood on shaky legs and hugged the pactrid’s wide torso. Rym accepted him readily, holding him close. The terror of what they’d narrowly escaped came crashing down upon Callum at that moment, and he broke down to tears. The sudden rush of emotion surprised and embarrassed him.

“I owe you my life,” Callum stammered. “Thank you.”

Rym wiped the tears from Callum’s cheek with one large finger. “Hush. You would’ve done the same for me.”

“Of course I would have, but that’s the problem, isn’t it? I couldn’t have saved you from that. Never!”

Rym’s silver eyes bore through him. Even in the waning twilight, they sparkled. Once again, his gripping stare would’ve been frightening had Callum not experienced it before.

“But you did save me, pup,” Rym finally said, then gestured to the eleven other pactrids. “You saved us all.”

The vanguard offered sombre nods in agreement.

“What do you mean? I did nothing,” Callum said.

Cior raised a fist. “We would have perished without this, Cal’oom.” The compass, held in his hand, dropped and swung from its chain.

“Yes, *you* saved us all.”

NINE

Hereafters

Boughs swayed gently in the breeze, encouraging dappled mid-morning sunlight to play across Callum's closed eyes. Delicate eddies lapped upon the shore of the pond before him. He took in an unhurried breath through his nose, welcoming the subtle scents of the surrounding forest. He'd never tire of that.

In the far distance, the echo of hammer on wood bounced off the trees and canopy above. The first settlement—Cinikar, named after the pactrid who led the initial expedition and discovered this new land—was rapidly becoming a village. At the rate of growth, it could be a small town in a year's time. The plan was to branch out with neighbouring villages to cultivate resources for the expanding population. After all, this territory would need to accommodate all the pactrids fleeing their original homeland, as well as the Anberan refugees.

Pactrids never built large or central cities, such as Anbera. Their approach was distinctly unique. Protecting nature was paramount. They built around it, not through it. When trees were felled to build their homes or fuel their hearths, saplings were always planted to take their place. It was such a simple concept, yet

Anberans never recognised the importance of keeping that balance. Each day, Callum gleaned a new tenet pactrids abided by, and each day, his respect for their way of life grew.

During settlement plan meetings, Callum tended to remain silent. By his account, this was their land and their rules. Only once did he interject with an idea—that pactrids and humans should live together, side by side. Both races had unique skills that could benefit everyone. He acknowledged their reasons for segregation before, but felt strongly that in order to live and work together, everyone should be seen as equals. Murmured exchanges of approval filled the space. That heartened him, as he had no idea if they'd agree to such a bold suggestion.

Splashing in the pond broke his thoughts, and he opened his eyes. Rym, lying beside him at the shore's edge, looked up at the same time. His fishing pole—a length of flexible wood—bobbed as the line tugged into the water. Grasping the line in his hand, he delicately took up the slack until the fish was pulled free from the water. After detaching the hook, he dropped the catch into a large bucket of water nearby, already teeming with other fish. It was best to keep them alive until they returned to the settlement with their bounty.

Food gathering—mainly fishing—had been their temporary job upon arriving at Cinikar. It was an important task, albeit trivial to undertake, given specifically to allow them recuperation time from their journey across the seabed. A pactrid healer had taken special care of Callum's ruined feet. His boots—while protective in their own right—were never meant for such long and sustained travel, and thus caused the horrible blisters, many of which became infected. Initially, he'd fought against the help—insisting he could manage on his own—but both Rym and the healer persisted. Wearing a beguiling smile, Rym opined with the question, "Who heals the healer?" Callum relented after that, thanking the healer for her sympathetic ministrations.

He also silently thanked Eleanor again for the black soft-soled shoes, enabling him to walk without causing undue stress on his mending feet. Meanwhile, a skilled pactrid leatherworker altered Callum's boots, inserting additional support to help against blisters in the future.

Callum hoped he'd never have to make that harrowing journey again, though. Even days after their arrival, he'd been plagued by

terrible nightmares of drowning. And worse, losing Rym to the sea while Callum somehow survived. That sense of loss—absolute and all-encompassing—would have him waking in tears until reality crashed down upon him. He had nothing to fear. Rym was always sleeping soundly nearby.

After the vanguard had recovered from their hard push to outpace the sea, Cior approached Callum to relinquish the compass. Callum refused, stating it was too important to have only as a keepsake. It stood to reason that the pactrids keep the compass, and potentially try to understand how it worked to create more. Perhaps they'd discover why the needle pointed to this new land?

Compasses were mere trinkets to Anberans. Certainly, they held intrinsic properties to aid in way-finding, but Anberans didn't try to understand how they worked—preferring to use the sun, moon, and stars. Living amongst the pactrids, it was one of many indications that reinforced the foolishness and irrational behaviour of Anberans.

Knowing the vanguard's survival was due to the sea halting just shy of the coastline would always haunt Callum. Only after contemplation did he recall that, of course, the moon had only just crested the horizon. His father had explained it when Callum was a child. The seawater captured by the moon's pull could only expand so quickly, and it took several days for the sea to reach its peak height.

Rym tossed his fishing line back in the water and lay down beside him, bringing Callum to the present again. The day was hot despite only being morning, and they'd both stripped their shirts off, much to Callum's delight. He never tired of gazing upon Rym's thick, muscled form. The pactrid never complained, seeming to enjoy the attention. Both found it difficult to keep their hands off each other, but then, there was no reason to deny themselves the pleasure, either. To be held in such powerful arms filled Callum with contentment—a bottomless longing that never sated. He tried his best to return that strength and passion, regardless of his size.

Neither spoke of the love that had emerged between them. Each time Callum felt the urge to say it aloud, his stomach would fall queasy. In the past, the rare times he'd confessed his love to someone, they would die. Surely, it was the war that had killed them, not the words. But perhaps, subconsciously, he didn't want to take that risk now.

Ultimately, it didn't matter. It wasn't needed. There was no doubt they loved each other. How Rym regarded him spoke volumes. The word *love* could only suggest a pale imprint of the true power held in their hearts and minds. Perhaps leaving the word unspoken would be seen as cold in the eyes of others, but Callum didn't care. Their future—whatever it held—would be spent together. Neither could imagine a better life.

And at long last, Callum had managed to claim the peace he sought. And he would have never been able to achieve that without Rym by his side.

Other Novels by Mike Carss

Deeds of Their Past
Strength of Fate

Contact Mike:
mikecarss@gmail.com

Follow Mike on Goodreads:
https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/7218891.Mike_Carss

Other websites:
https://mikecarss.wordpress.com
https://www.altusmusic.ca

About the Author

Mike Carss is Canadian, hailing from Ottawa, better recognised for his music than his prose. Mike's literary journey started innocently enough in 2013 with *Deeds of Their Past*. What began as a short narrative developed into a fantasy adventure novel that followed the travels of two morally dubious characters.

The sequel, *Strength of Fate*, took nearly a decade to complete, however finishing that project opened the floodgates. Work on *The Roaming Sea* began soon after, and its completion was reached in

record time for Carss—under a year. Happy with his accomplishments, he has no plans to slow down. As of late 2024, a new series is currently in its planning stages.